Sheila Finch: Reading the Bones

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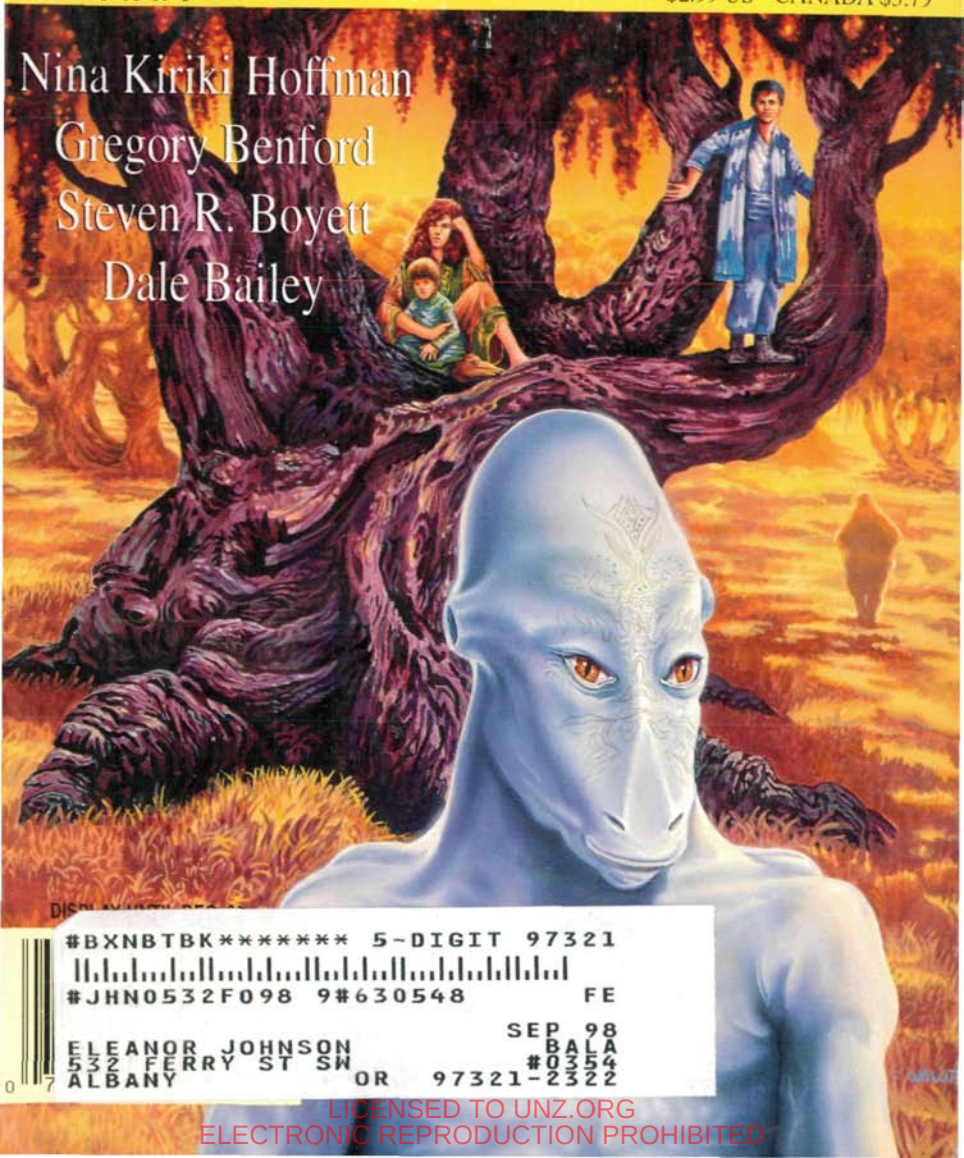

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The comedian George Burns once quipped that "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city." While many of us would disagree with the sentiment (especially during the holiday season), the thought of it resonates with this lovely and haunting story from Nina Hoffman about a lonely traveler.

Gone to Heaven Shouting

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

I'VE BEEN ON THIS QUEST for forty-seven years, ever since my sixteenth birthday. Every once in a while I find what I'm looking for, and the restless urge to search settles for a little while. It sleeps.

It never sleeps long.

I haven't been home in thirty years, though I've directed others there.

There are music webs in every community. Find a thread to follow and it will lead you to little knots of musicians who will give you other threads, if you treat them right. There's the church choir circuit, and the community choir circuit, and the big performing arts centers that play host to all kinds of different musicians, big names in classical, rock, folk, alternative; and then there are the contra dance groups, and the old time fiddlers, and the rock bands and the jazz bands and the other people who play in little night clubs and taverns and small concert halls. There are high school garage bands who know about each other.

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Then there are the people who practice alone at home when no one else is around to hear, and those I can almost never track down, their threads are so short. Mostly they aren't the ones I want, but it hurts me to know that perhaps sometimes they are.

Some threads lead to more than one sort of musician, and some never cross into alien territory at all.

I never know where I'll find my people. I used to search for them in a more diffuse way, move into a town and walk its streets up and down and wait for the tug of recognition, watch for a gesture or a flash of light or a certain look around the eyes. These last few years I've gone to the music webs, tweaked threads, listened for rumors. I'm probably missing a lot of my people. Not all of them have found their way to music.

Not all of them wish to be found.

I've caught more family fish with music as a net than I did just strolling and trolling with no bait at all.

My name is Cyrus Locke. I carry a fiddle.

Also nice bamboo spoons for rhythm, and a pennywhistle and some harmonicas, but those are easier to hide.

IT WAS A DECEMBER Saturday night like many they get in the Pacific Northwest, stars scattered across the dark sky, fog lying like pooled milk in roadside ditches and in low spots in the pastures. The air smelled of cold and woodsmoke. I was traveling by air, the way I do at night when people are less likely to notice. I don't go directly over the roads, where headlights might catch me, but I keep close enough not to miss the sort of buildings I want to investigate.

I had watched a Christmas parade that morning in town, paying particular attention to the various marching bands, but I hadn't seen any trace of my people, though I'd enjoyed the spectacle. Now I was just covering territory and listening. On a cold night you don't often hear music. People have got their weatherproofing up and keep their tunes inside. I would rather search than hole up, though, especially since I had just finished three cups of coffee at a diner and was wide awake.

I drifted over a small country school, slowing to look at it properly. Sometimes there are community events in a school of a Saturday night,

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and I specialize in community events. If someone is going to shine, that's a good place to find them.

No sign of life there, but on the air a thread of music.

South of the school was a big old oak tree, and huddled near and beneath some of its limbs, a grange building. Light, music, parked cars. Just the sort of place I liked. I chose a shadow in the grove of oaks behind the building and slipped down into it, checking the back porch for people smoking or children playing. I used to get caught once in a while in the early days, when I hadn't learned caution. Once getting caught led to one of my better discoveries. All in all, though, I'd rather pick my moments.

I stood for a while listening to the music. Country western, swing, old tunes that I remembered hearing on radios in backwoods in the fifties, early in my questing years. I took my spoons and a D-pitch harmonica out of my knapsack and stuck them in my pants pockets, then lifted and lodged the knapsack in high branches of one of the oak trees.

On the ground again, I opened my fiddle case and took out Lucia. She's been with me twenty-two years, ever since I rescued her from a pawn shop. If I had some of the gifts of other people in my family I might be able to get her to talk, tell me her past history. What I know of her is that the label inside says she's a copy of a Stradivarius, like most fiddles you find, and it has the name of a German city and a date, 1897. I got out the bow and tightened the hairs, then tuned the fiddle, listening to the music leaking out of the building, an old tune Hank Williams had covered in the early fifties, "Take These Chains from My Heart."

I put the fiddle and bow away, straightened, took a deep breath, then wandered around toward the front of the grange, wondering how these people took to strangers. The windows were curtained with what looked like yellow-orange sheets, so I couldn't see in. One window, the one nearest the stage, was open to the frosty night. I caught a whiff of people: cologne, perfume, and sweat. I heard the shuffling sound of dancers on a wooden floor.

There is a dream that comes to me sometimes, more often lately than I like, of all the world poisoned and empty and dead. The only colors are gray, black, brown, and ice-white. In this dream I am alive.

In life I have survived many things and anticipate surviving many more.

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In the dream, I am alive, but alone.

I opened the double door into the grange hall and saw people dancing and people playing music and I smiled the way I do every time I know my dream has not come true yet. I am so glad to see people alive, whether they are family members or not. My heart lightened. I edged to the left, where older folks were sitting on a padded bench, and murmured to a white-haired woman in a pale blue dress, "This a private party, or can anybody join?"

"Welcome, stranger," she said. "Go right on up and make yourself at home." Such a nice smile she had.

They were playing "If Teardrops Were Pennies" as I edged past couples dancing. Everyone had smiles for me. I smiled back. Sun has beaten my skin brown and folded, and age has bleached my hair oyster-shell white. I am a fraction taller than most but can still fit into clothes I find on the medium rack in thrift stores, like the scuffed loafers, faded dungarees, gray-and-white striped shirt, black leather vest, and beat-up bomber jacket I was wearing.

All around the cavernous room were people who looked vaguely like me in size and age, some sitting on benches that lined the walls, some out on the dance floor, coupled and whirling. A few of them were a little more dressed up than I was. There were a few kids too, and some younger couples. My dream of destruction retreated as I looked around and felt that for this moment I had found a home and a family.

I get this family feeling at the best of times. Sometimes it's deceptive. Often it's not, though. There are other places and people, foreign to where I stood that Saturday night, that feel even closer to home to me. Sometimes I walk into alien worlds when I open a door. Sometimes after I've spent a little time in an alien world it embraces me too. Not many cast me out completely.

There were three people with guitars toward the front of the room, and a woman with a string bass, two fiddlers, one white-haired fellow with a bandolier of harmonicas, a young woman with a banjo, and an older woman sitting and strumming a mandolin. Three microphones on stands amplified voice, fiddle, harmonica; cords were hidden under little throw rugs. Black instrument cases littered the stage behind the musicians, and the desks and floor near where they were playing. Some cases had

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instruments still in them; a rotating cast of musicians, apparently.

Not quite sure of the particular protocol of this place, I took a seat near the woman with the mandolin and held my fiddle case on my lap. She was wearing a turquoise sweatshirt with big furry white cats painted on it in glitter. She had red-framed glasses and a big grin, and curly dark hair shot with silver. Her earrings were silver snowflakes.

The tune ended and she smiled and nodded at me. "You new in town?"

"Yep."

"Welcome to Spruce Grange." She held out a hand and I shook it. "I'm Alma."

"Cyrus," I said.

"Care to join us?"

"Love to."

"You want to sign up for a couple tunes?" She nodded toward a yellow shopping pad sitting behind the musicians on a podium that had been shoved up against the stage. "You can just play backup if you want."

"I'll sign," I said. One of the fiddlers stepped up to the central microphone and began "Black Velvet," an old waltz. I hadn't heard it in a long time. It was surely pretty.

I edged behind the other musicians, who made room, and picked up a chewed pencil. The sign-up sheet had twenty numbers with names listed beside them: Joe W., John I., John P., Grace, Calvin, Annie, Jim, Sharon, Lilian, Harry, Dale, Earl, Everett, fine old names with nothing strange about them. None of them sounded like names my family would use; we generally venture farther away from common when naming our babies. I wrote "21" and "Cyrus," wondering where on the list they had reached, how soon they would expect me to play.

Someone would tell me.

I set my case on the edge of the stage, opened it, and got out Lucia and the bow. Tightened bow hairs, ran some rosin across them, checked my tuning, glanced at the other musicians near me, got a nod and a smile from the bass player, and edged into the tune, playing melody very softly to get it back in my fingers and my head, then venturing into harmony, observing the rules of being a backup player: Listen to the leader. Never play louder than whoever is leading, and never play fancier. Follow the

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leader's tempo by watching his or her foot tapping even if other people are lagging behind or getting ahead. Smile.

It wasn't great music, but it was good-enough-to-dance-to music, and that was swell. People were moving to it and smiling. Near the door at the other end of the hall, three people were even boot-scooting while nearer couples held each other and waltzed. New ways coming in, I thought, then wondered how I knew they were new. I was melding just a little. Thoughts can travel by air, and air is my sign. Join a tune, mix with it, slide under the surface, add your mite while others are adding theirs, and you can get a little tangled with the thoughtstream.

Here it was friendly for the most part. The first fiddler focused on fingering, hoping the tune would stick with her until she got through her fourth repeat of it. The second fiddler hated the sound of the banjo, but didn't hate the banjo player. One of the guitar players was annoyed at the second fiddler, thinking that the second fiddler was misbehaving by playing fancier than the first fiddler: grandstanding. Bad manners. The mandolin player was interested in me. She did think I was a good-enough musician, and so far not too musically pushy, and that was warming.

I let the thoughts go and sank into the music, which had a life of its own. The tune had its shadowy ancestry, passed from person to person, and its brief life, born at the first bowstroke, dying with the final flourish; in the middle it reached out into people's heads and planted its seeds there. With luck it would be reborn many ways — a hum, a whistle, or maybe a kid hearing it and wanting to figure out how to play it. Tunes were like benign viruses. They could sure as shooting mutate from one life to the next, too.

The first fiddler kicked up her foot to signal that she was approaching the end of the tune. She closed it down after that, nodded to the few people who applauded, turned and told us, "Chinese Breakdown," and started on her second tune.

I played twiddles that supported her tune and watched people two-step lively around the floor. It was so fine to see people enjoying themselves in the midst of music and dance. I basked in it, part of the music tapestry myself.

After a while I woke out of the moment and thought about my quest, and opened up my ears for that particular thread of sound that would tell

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me I had found a family member. An overtone, a harmonic that nobody else could quite produce. It was not a sound that came out of an instrument, but I could hear my own melody there in the overhead, singing about who I was and what I was doing at that moment, a tumbling tune of joy.

Faintly, faintly, masked by other sounds, there was the thread I sought. Fainter than I had ever heard it before. I tuned my listening to this trace, kept my mind on it while my hands played music along with the first fiddler.

It was a strange little melody, plaintive and constant. "Chinese Breakdown" came to a rousing finish and the dancers and listeners clapped, and still this tiny tune played on, the same notes sounding, no shift in awareness (my own tune had spun to a waiting pedal note until the next overtune would rise and it could harmonize). In the brief break between one player and the next I listened to the faint tune and recognized it. "Bright Morning Stars Are Rising," an old Christmas tune whose origins I did not know.

One of the guitar players stepped up to the mike, then turned back to face the musicians. "'Hey, Good-Looking,'" she said, "in G." She grinned at us. "Alma, play me in, okay?"

The mandolin player nodded and grinned and struck up the tune and pretty soon we were all flowing along the notes together. The guitar player had a nice clear voice and the bass kept good rhythm and dancers flocked to the floor. In the middle between verses the guitar player surprised me by turning to me and lifting her brows, then nodding toward one of the mikes. I stepped up and played a verse, wondering how this would all work out in the hierarchy of musicians, that she had asked a stranger for backup before she went to the ones who were already here. Such tiny shifts and swerves in the living dynamic; everything could change, or everything could absorb change and return to its flow unimpeded.

I played well and strongly, decorated notes with flourishes, finished my verse and nodded back to her, smiling, then stepped away from the mike. "Thanks," she said, and sang the second verse. It was all right. The others still projected contentment. Polite, friendly, welcoming people.

The tiny thread of family still played, underneath it all, unchanging as the evening moved on. We played down through the list, with some

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people putting down instruments and going out to dance and others coming in off the floor to pick up instruments. I played two tunes, "Florida Blues" and "Kentucky Waltz."

Then the musicians took a break and most people went to the dining room for potluck desserts.

"Mighty fine, mighty fine, Cyrus," Alma said as she put her mandolin back in its hardshell case. "Hope you'll come next week. We're playing out at Ethel Creek Grange then."

"Thank you. I don't know if I'll still be in town, but I appreciate the invitation."

"Want some coffee?"

"In a couple minutes, thank you," I said.

She smiled, picked up a cane that had been lying beside her chair, and moved off after most of the others toward the dining hall.

I put my fiddle away, set the case on the stage. The mystery tune was still playing, clearer now that other ambient noise had quieted. I looked around the nearly empty room.

I glanced through the door into the next-door room and saw a combination kitchen-dining room which ran the length of the dance hall but was narrower across: cream walls, lace curtains, two rows of end-to-end long narrow tables draped with paper tablecloths, folding metal chairs lined up on both sides of them and people sitting in the chairs, talking. At the far end of the dining room was the kitchen area, with a counter spread with snacks in dishes or supermarket plastic containers. People lined up, holding paper plates, to get desserts. Some dropped a dollar into a donation coffee can on the buffet.

A few people lingered on the benches in the dance hall, talking with each other. One of the guitar players, a tall old guy named Dale, was still sitting up front and noodling on his guitar. The banjo-playing woman came back from the kitchen carrying two Styrofoam cups of steaming coffee. She set them down carefully and then sat next to Dale.

I wandered up the hall and down, pausing near the small clots of people and listening for the tune. Not there, not here, not there. I wandered toward Dale and Rose, the banjo-player. The tune was louder there, but it didn't seem to be coming from either of them.

I climbed up onto the stage.

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Louder.

Was someone hiding up here? I was satisfied at this point that the tune was something other people didn't naturally hear, since no one else had responded to it. The music had that flavor of family, and it went on and on. It was hard for me to believe that some lost lonely person would hide out on the stage or in the wings making this music when there were so many friendly people out front.

Not everybody in my family can adjust to regular people, though. Lots of them hide out entirely and never mix. There seems to be more and more of a trend toward isolation with some of my people, and I deplore it. Wonderful people are everywhere. You miss a lot if you stop looking for them.

Simple blank flats framed the stage, with a few pieces of rickety furniture against them. The back wall held a working door. I went through it, listening to the air, tasting. Bats, somewhere up above in the galleries. To the left, to the right, slender dark corridors leading to the wings. No complicated stagecraft here. I had seen grange skits before. Full of enthusiasm, nothing complicated. Occasional raw talent. Occasional trained talent.

On a table, a straw farmer's hat. A bouquet of silk flowers in rust and bronze and gold.

No sign of the tunemaker.

"What are you looking for?" asked a voice from behind me. I turned and found Alma leaning on her cane and peering at me along the backstage corridor.

That was the question, wasn't it?

Without the aid of music as a carrier, I had no idea what she was thinking.

"A tune," I said after a moment.

"You're looking for a tune behind the scenes at Spruce Grange?"

"Do you know that old Christmas carol, 'Bright Morning Stars Are Rising'?"

"Eh?" She cocked her head.

I listened to the trace of music. Here, close to its source, I heard a child's voice singing the words on top of thin fiddle notes. I lifted my voice and joined the song in mid-verse: "'Oh, where are our dear mothers? Oh, where are our dear mothers? Day is a-breaking in my soul.'"

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Alma took two steps back, her face clouding, mouth drooping from its smile.

"What is it?" I asked. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Why are you looking for that song here?" she whispered.

I opened the door in the scene and stepped out into the light on stage. She entered from the wing. I sat on a metal chair among the instrument cases, and she sat on a chair next to me and laid her cane on the floor.

"Something is singing that song," I said.

"What do you mean?" Her eyes were bleak behind her glasses.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Some people do, I know. I believe, but then, I've met a number of them.

"No," she whispered. She looked right and left, then stared down at her feet.

"Never mind, then," I said. I patted her hand.

A thread of family here, but not really in the present time. I could come back later and search, I was pretty sure, after everybody else had left. Might as well enjoy what was left of the evening.

"When I was a little girl," she whispered, and looked up at me.

I smiled and waited.

"When I was a young girl, I was searching in the woods for scrap metal to help with the war effort. My daddy had gone off to war and I was a wild girl, a handful, roaming up and roaming down. Momma couldn't keep me home at all. Any excuse to get out would do. I was out picking blackberries before there were any ripe ones, or looking for filberts or pears or apples from trees gone wild from pioneer orchards. Scrap metal was a good excuse to wander, those years.

"It was in these woods, just back of the grange here — that was before there were all these people in the valley; folks lived much further apart, and the town was a lot smaller in those days — in these woods I found them."

"Who?"

"That little family. They'd raised a house out of up-and-down logs, not regular crosswise. Squatters was what they was. This all used to be part of Tim and Adeline Venture's donation land claim, but they never did log it all off, weren't enough kids in the family...well.

"So I was running through the woods keeping an eye out for metal, only I was so far in wasn't much chance anybody had left any metal thing

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out there. I thought I was walking where no man had walked before, and then I smelled smoke and came to a clearing."

She paused, her eyes staring unseeing across the hall. Below us, out on the dance floor near the microphones, Dale and Rose played a mournful old song about departed lovers and lonesome train whistles. The banjo made everything sound spunky.

"Morning glories had twined right up over the house." Her voice had dropped to a whisper. "I never saw such a thing before or since. Up-and-down logs — some still part of growing trees, Cyrus, with branches sprouting out the top. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"Maybe," I said quietly. If the family she talked about had any sign Earth people in it, with their gifts of growth and plant-talk, many things were possible.

"And a little vegetable garden up near the house," Alma murmured, looking into the past. "Sassy green leaves on those squash vines. Tall corn. Lacy carrot tops. I tell you, I felt like I had walked into a fairy tale, this snug little house in the middle of nowhere with the flowers growing all over it."

She fell silent again. I sat and listened to the child's thin voice. "Oh, where are our dear fathers? Oh, where are our dear fathers? Oh, where are our dear fathers? Da-a-ay is a-breakin' in my soul."

"I woulda run away again," said Alma presently. "Too many stories my ma told about tripping over a fairy mound and going into another land for a century or two until you come out and everything's changed, everyone you know is dead. I woulda run, but the wind changed then, and I smelled that smell, and heard the child's voice."

She was quiet a long time then. I feared the other musicians would return from the coffee-and-dessert break and the music would start and Alma would fall out of her memory into the present. Once she left this confiding mood, I would not know how to bring her back to it, and she was getting to the meat of the story now.

I touched her hand. A terrible temptation came over me to use my powers of persuasion and force the story out of her, but I waited, and the impulse passed. I could make people talk about anything; I could make them forget afterward everything they had said; but I could not make myself forget what I had done, and those memories were difficult to live with. I had enough of them already.

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"The child was singing that song," Alma said. "Her voice didn't have much voice left in it, if you know what I mean. And the smell was the smell of dead things that have been lying a while in the heat."

"What happened?" I whispered.

"She wandered around the side of the house, a thin little girl in a dirty white dress that was all tatters. She was sick. Her cheeks were caved in, and her eyes sunk down in her head. Come to find out later, after the doctor saw her, she probably hadn't eaten anything in days, and there were vegetables lying on that ground just as fine as anything you see in the market. She wandered and wavered around, singing. 'Some have gone to heaven shouting.'"

I could hear her singing that verse even as Alma spoke.

"I stepped out of the woods. 'Little girl, little girl. Who are you?' I said. She didn't even look my way, just pranced away and back, singing. I went to her and caught her hands. She looked at me then, and her eyes were like a dead person's. She hummed the tune. Months afterward I couldn't get it out of my head.

"The smell was stronger. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't so old myself. 'What's the matter, little girl?' I said. She sang at me and that was all. She didn't try to pull away or anything. Just sang."

Alma's hand slipped from under mine. She put her hands over her eyes. "You know, I knew that everything had gone wrong, and I didn't know what to do. I let go of the girl. I opened the door of the house. The door, it had a carving of a man's face on it, a bearded face with leaves all around it, and it scared me some — too much like something from Ma's tales, a door that could look at you.

"I opened that door, and that horrible smell came out, stronger than before, and the buzzing of flies. Only light in the room came from it might be a hole in the roof, I didn't look long enough to figure it out; but there was the two of them in there on a bed, lying under that hard light, dead, as far as I could tell, for days maybe; covered with flies."

She lowered her hands from her face, gripped mine in both of hers. "She had to be going in and out," she whispered. "The fire was still lit. That was hard for me to know, that she would go inside with them in such a state." She shook her head.

"I didn't know what to do. I took the girl's hand and led her out of

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there. The grange was the closest building. I led her here. It was a Saturday, and women were quilting. I brought the girl here and they all started up like a flock of birds. Someone got the doctor. They tried to feed that child, tried to give her water, tried to get her to name herself, but she never did. Only thing she ever did was sing. She died later that night. Doctor said it was starving did it."

The hall filled with talk and commotion as people came back from their conversations and coffee. Musicians gathered around the microphones. Alma gripped my hands and finally looked up at me. "We never even knew their names," she said. The anguish she had felt more than fifty years earlier was still in her face.

"It's all right," I said. I held her hands tight, trying to give her reassurance. "I'll take care of it."

She cocked her head and stared hard at me, almost as hard as she had stared into the past. "What do you mean?" she asked.

I looked at her and wondered how much to tell her. "I believe in ghosts," I said at last. "I'll talk to her."

"Talk to her." Her voice sounded flat.

"She's here. Still singing. I'll talk to her."

"What good will that do?"

"I think she must have been a relative of mine," I said, "and in my family, we know how to care for our dead."

"Alma?" someone called from below. "You back me up on 'Your Cheatin' Heart'?"

"Sure, honey," she said in a distracted voice. She grabbed her cane, left the stage, and went to get her mandolin. We both joined in the music again. Between tunes, though, she was always looking at me.

THE DANCE LASTED until eleven, the dregs of it anyway; people packed up and left in trickles earlier, until at last only Alma and Rose and a guitar player named John and I were left, and the couple who swept the dancing dust off the floor and put away the folding metal chairs.

"Time to go home," John said, "before they kick us out."

I wiped the rosin off Lucia's strings with a bandana I keep in her case for that purpose. I loosened the horse hairs on my bow. John put away his

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guitar, Rose packed up her banjo, and Alma locked her mandolin in its case. We said good night to the caretakers and left the building amid their invitation to come back next month.

Rose and John went to their cars. Alma stood beside me in the chill night. The motion-sensitive light above the door lit us from behind, but if we stood still long enough, it would switch off again. I waited.

"You got a car, Cyrus?"

"No."

"How'd you get here?"

"Hitched a ride." On a wind.

"You want a ride somewheres else?"

I smiled at her. "I still have business here."

"You believe in ghosts," she said, and then whispered, "I've been so afraid they exist. None of those deaths was quiet, and I've never been able to stop seeing them. Poor little mite. Holding her hand was like holding twigs."

"What I need to do now is private, Alma."

"Don't tell me that," she said. "Don't you tell me to go away with this darkness still in my head. I've lived with it a long time, Cyrus. I am more than ready to let it go."

I sighed. I wondered. Even though she didn't want to go, I could tell her to go, and she would do it. But if the thought of these spirits was troubling her so much, how could I leave her with that darkness? "Wait here," I told Alma, and I went around back of the grange and lifted up into the tree where I had hidden my things.

Mostly I make my own rules, but there are some very strong ones almost all of us follow, and one of them concerns outsiders. I'm not supposed to reveal family secrets if I can help it.

I took my snow crystal out of my knapsack and sat on a branch, holding the crystal in both hands. "Powers and Presences, lead me and guide me," I murmured. "Help me to choose what is right for each person."

"Which are your choices?" whispered a breeze past my ear.

"Here is a spirit that needs a path, and here is a person who has a troubled mind. I would like to help them both if I can."

"Why not?" whispered the wind.

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"One is not of our family."

A moment of silence slipped by, and then the whisper came: "In your hands."

I kissed the crystal, tucked it into my pocket, and shrugged into my knapsack. I climbed down the tree, and a good thing, too: Alma was on the ground below, leaning on her cane and looking up. "What were you doing up there?" she asked.

"Praying a little and getting my things," I said, hanging by my arms from the lowest limb, then dropping. I had not swung from a limb in quite that way since I was a boy, and I felt absurd.

"Your things," said Alma. She glanced from my fiddle case, still at the base of the tree, to the knapsack on my back. "Those are all your things?"

I nodded. "Just passing through."

"On your way to where?"

"Everywhere."

"Nowhere," she said.

For a moment I felt a strange sense of vertigo. My dream of the death of the planet unfolded in my mind. Fields of barren ground, dark blasted hills, ice along the edges. How bleak it would be to have no one to look for, no one to talk to, no one to jam with. Why explore when every place was gray and dead?

But this was not my reality. I blinked and looked at Alma. "Everywhere," I said again. Everywhere there were musicians, coffee shops, radio stations, roads; crops in the field, people in cars, animals in forests, crickets and frog choruses and murmuring bees, and the slow rich sound of voices talking on a porch of a summer evening, voices murmuring in a firelit room of a winter's night.

Usually my voice wasn't among them, though. I did a lot of listening and appreciating, but not much sharing.

"Have it your own way," Alma said. "Now what?"

"I'm going back inside as soon as they close it up and leave."

"Just how do you imagine you'll get inside that building? You some kind of burglar?"

I smiled at her.

"I have a key," she said. "I'm on the planning committee. I'll let you in."

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"Alma? Alma!" Voices called from the front of the building. They sounded alarmed. "You out here? You all right? Alma!"

"Oh, my car's still there," she muttered. She and her cane walked around to the front of the building. "You go on home, Charlie and Liz. I'll lock up. I've got some thinking to do."

"All right," they said, relief in their voices. Presently a car started and drove off down the road.

"Come on, Cyrus," said Alma and we went back inside Spruce Grange through the front door.

The hall looked unfamiliar and dark with nobody in it but us. Alma went into the coat closet and flipped on banks of lights.

"Can you light the stage?" I asked.

Lights went on above the stage.

It was strange to see this empty place that minutes earlier had been alive with people and dance. My doom dream murmured in my mind.

"What next?" Alma said.

I climbed the stairs to the stage. No clutter of instruments and coats; even the metal chairs were folded and stood against the backdrop.

I listened.

"Some are down in the valley singing..."

I knelt on the bare wood stage. I took my snow crystal from my pocket and placed it on the floor, then slid out of my knapsack and sat back on my heels, looking around.

"Some are down in the valley singing..."

Alma leaned against the stage's edge and watched me.

"What I'm about to do may seem strange to you," I said. "It will not hurt you, but it may frighten you. Are you sure you want to watch?"

"Some are down in the valley singing..."

"It concerns that little girl?"

"I believe it does."

She gripped her cane, hunched her shoulders. "Go ahead."

"Da-a-a-ay is a-breakin' in my soul..."

I took a small, pale green glass plate from my knapsack. I had made it as part of my apprenticeship to the glassblower in Cielito, before I understood the limitations of my being Sign Air — fire would heed me as

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much as it did anybody without fire persuasions; I had no skill with it, but still, the plate was a gift of earth and fire, lopsided and thick as it was, and I smiled at it as I did every time I dug it out of its protecting silk. I set it on the stage beside my snow crystal and placed a sprig of desert sage and some dried cedar twigs on it.

I sat and gathered my mind, preparing a version of the "Things Seen and Unseen" chant that would let the invisible attain visibility if it so desired. Usually this chant revealed things whether they wanted to be shown or not, and only for a brief time. I wanted a version that would grant power to the invisible to choose the length of its interaction with light.

When I was satisfied that I had shaped the tool I wanted, I touched fire to the spices on the glass plate. They burned quickly, leaving a smudge of smoke, a signature in the air that smelled of desert starlight and night forest. I addressed Powers and Presences and spoke my chant.

The song stopped.

When I looked up, a young girl stood across from me.

She was slender and hollow-eyed and wore a white shift. She looked just like my little sister Drusilla had at ten, long dark wavy hair almost to her waist, a pale fine-featured face with large gray eyes, slender hands. She was not gaunt the way Alma had described her.

"Presence," I murmured.

Her eyes widened. She touched her chest.

I smiled at her. "Presence," I said again.

"Uncle?" she whispered.

"Cousin," I said. If she had died during World War II, at about ten — she looked perhaps ten, perhaps eleven — then she and I had been born at about the same time.

"I don't understand," whispered the girl. She blinked. She glanced around, saw Alma, who stood there staring at her. Alma dropped her cane. Her right fist pressed against her breastbone, and her left hand gripped her right. Her eyes were wide.

"Gift me a name? Mine is Cyrus Locke," I said.

"Helena Exile," said the girl, still staring at Alma.

Exile! A name taken by those who were cast out from our family, the threads binding them to us cut. She was too young to be exiled; her parents must have been the ones banished. I did not even know which clan place

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they had come from; it was all old news now, no doubt, though I would have to check with the Powers and other Presences about final disposition.

"Helena," I said. "This is Alma."

Alma stood unmoving, her mouth a little open.

"Alma, are you all right?"

Alma said, "How? How can she be standing there more real than life? She looks much stronger than when I saw her."

Helena's face clouded. "Cousin Cyrus," she said. "Please."

"Cousin." I lifted my hands to her even though I knew she could not touch them. "You are only halfway here. You've been halfway here a long time, fifty years or more. I offer you a chance to choose. Do you wish to go farther away? Do you wish to return?"

"I — I — My mother! My father!" She stiffened, her eyes glazing.

"They are gone too. They left before you did. They may be waiting on the other side of shadow, or they may be trapped without a proper unbinding. I will tend to them soon. Just now, let's think about you."

"I don't feel — " She reached across to me and tried to grasp my hands. Hers passed through mine. "Oh!"

Alma gasped as well. I looked at her. She was paper pale. Her eyelids fluttered and she began to sag. I bespoke the air around her to hold her up, worried even as I did so that I was going too far. Ghosts, whether she believed in them or not, were part of her everyday, a conversational coin always being spent. Solid air would be outside her experience. "Breathe deeply," I said to her, and asked air to strengthen and sustain her.

After a moment the color returned to her face. She still looked terrified.

"Alma," I said.

"You — you're one of those black magic demon sorcerers, aren't you?"

"No." I glanced at Helena, who looked down at her hands, at the glass plate and snow crystal at her feet, at me, and then at Alma. Helena might be confused, but if her parents had raised her with any knowledge of her heritage, she would be able to understand what had happened to her, given time and explanation. Alma, on the other hand —

"Demon has nothing to do with what I am," I said.

"Are you evil?"

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Sometimes. Regrets still pricked me. "No."

"Let me go."

"Are you all right? You looked like you were going to fall."

"I'm fine," she said, her voice hollow as though she were trying to convince herself.

I bespoke air to be air-like again, and Alma shuddered, then bent to retrieve her cane. She limped to the double doors at the far end of the hall, never looking back. When she had closed the doors behind her, I turned to Helena.

"Little cousin," I said. "Flesh has left you. Where do you wish to go next?"

She squatted across from me and stared at me. "I have been so lost," she whispered, "so alone in the darkness."

"Your spirit tied itself to this place."

She looked around. "What is this place?"

"This is a grange hall. A community place where people get together; not usually members of our family, though. There is music here sometimes. You were singing."

"Why am I here?"

"This is where you died, Alma said."

"Alma..."

"Alma found you in the forest and brought you here. She was trying to help you."

"I remember a girl." Her eyes looked inward. "A tall brown girl with twigs in her hair. One of the first strangers I ever saw. I remember her and I don't remember her." She shook her head. "That was after...I — "

She screamed.

It was a high, huge, sad, chilling sound, a sound that might have echoed across a cold landscape of white and gray, the last sound of life on a dead world. It lasted a good while. The hair on my head and the back of my neck rose, and my skin tingled with goosebumps.

Alma looked in through the doors.

Helena screamed, first with her eyes closed, then with her eyes opened. She stared up at the ceiling and screamed.

She stopped. The ensuing silence lay like a weight on me. She stared at me.

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"My parents died!" she yelled.

"Yes."

"They died and left me all alone!"

"Yes."

"I couldn't wake them! Mami! Papa! How could you leave me?"

"They couldn't help it," I said when no other answer came.

"I couldn't let them go, but they weren't there anyway."

"Yes," I said.

"They didn't come back."

"No." I held out my arms to her, wanting to hug her, but how?

Air whispered past my ears.

Air could be solid for me.

"Helena," I murmured, holding out my arms, asking air to be solid where she was in it.

She sobbed and came to me and crawled into my lap, and I put my arms around her, air and light and spirit unbreathed, unfinished. I held her and she cried. Her world had been as bleak as the dead land in my dreams, shorn as it was of all she knew of warmth.

"You don't have to be alone anymore," I told her when her sobs slowed. "You can stay with me, or you can go on and find your parents."

"How can I find them now?" She stirred and pushed away from me. It was strange. It did not feel like a child I held; she was smooth and cool and had no breath or heartbeat. I embraced a weightless stone. She pushed at my arms, and I released her.

She rose and looked at Alma, who had come back and stood against the edge of the stage again. "You were the girl who came?" Helena said.

"Yes," said Alma.

"She was the girl who found me," Helena told me, "and look at her now. She's an old woman. I couldn't even find my parents when they first left their bodies. How can I possibly find them now?"

"Where are they buried?" I asked Alma.

"At the little cemetery up the hill behind Ravensville Church. All three together we put them in the ground, under a stone with no name on it. 'Mother, Father, Child' was all it said, and the year of their death."

"May we go there now?"

"I can drive," she said.

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"Would you?" I spoke to her doubts and fears. Often enough I have spent time with people who have no magic in their lives, and I have done my best to understand how that feels.

There are so many things to be afraid of.

Yet Alma had returned in the middle of Helena's scream, for me the most frightening thing that had happened tonight. It was a sound of despair that came from a place so deep I had not known whether it had an end. I had been afraid I might spend the rest of my life listening to it.

"I will," said Alma.

"Thank you." I looked at Helena. "Are you ready to leave this place? You have been here a long time."

"There's nothing here for me," she said.

I thought of the music and dance earlier that evening. When I died, I might like to haunt a place like this for such a taste of life, friendship, warmth once a month. But Helena had not been awake to any of it.

I looked at the glass plate on the stage, the dusting of gray ash left behind by cedar and sage. I thanked Powers and Presences for help, asked for more, put away my tools and climbed to my feet, picked up my knapsack and my fiddle case. Helena and I went down the stairs together to the floor below.

"I see it," Alma said, staring at us.

I glanced at Helena, then at Alma.

"You *are* related. Your nose, hers. Your eyes. How can that be? How could you know?"

"Recognition," I said. "In the music."

She frowned. Her eyebrows drew together. "Guess I don't have to understand it to see that it works," she said. "Let's go."

For a moment Helena and I hesitated in the grange's doorway. I watched her. She looked behind her at the stage, confused.

"You've woven yourself into this place," I said.

"Unbind me."

I worked it out in my head, a thread-cutting chant for ties of place. It had to be specific. I don't like unbinding work; too risky, too counter to my impulses to connect. I said this chant for Helena Exile, though, and felt the brief shock of freedom shake her.

I remembered that shock. I had cut myself free of my home place all

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those years ago, though I didn't realize I was doing it at the time. It had hurt.

ALMA DROVE a big maroon sedan with well-padded white seats. Helena and I got in the back. Alma glanced over her shoulder at us, shook her head, started the car, and drove through the cold December night along back roads that cut through quiet fields, past houses where all the lights were out. Every once in a while Alma shook her head again.

We went through brief patches of forest, then through a little sleeping town that had a general store, a garage/gas pump, and a feed store. Then we came to a white church among trees, its spire pointing to the stars.

Alma turned the car off on a dirt road past the church and we edged up a small forested hill to a graveyard. She stopped the car, turned off the engine and the headlights. We sat there in silence for a little while.

I opened the door and climbed out, my knapsack in my hand. Helena joined me.

The car engine ticked. Somewhere birds chirped and silenced. Gravestones stood in less-than-orderly rows, some new, some old, some ornate, some plain, some with fresh or plastic flowers at their foot, and some embraced by weeds.

Alma emerged. "Not really my favorite place to be at night," she said after a moment.

"There's nothing here will hurt you," I told her. Then I checked. Sometimes the energies surrounding death and the dead can get muddled and enhanced and strange. Much depends on how people relate to their dead, and what the dead plan to do next.

There was no smell of danger in this place.

Alma shuddered. She straightened her shoulders, gripped her cane in one hand and a flashlight in the other, and headed in among the stones. We followed her.

It was a plain stone, not even granite or marble: a rounded rock you might find in a river, and it said just what Alma had told us: MOTHER, FATHER, CHILD 1943.

"Oh," said Helena, holding out open hands, waving them above the ground. "I feel so strange."

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I took my snow crystal from my pocket, held it in my right hand. *Powers and Presences, help us to find the right way to proceed. May we awaken those who sleep here?*

They are here and they do not sleep.

I looked up as Alma dropped her cane and gripped my arm. Two glowing shadows stood beyond the headstone, holding hands.

I said the chant I had said for Helena, "Things Seen and Unseen," modified so that those unseen could become seen for as long as they wished.

The shining shadows darkened, took on weight and hue. A broad man and a narrow woman, he in overalls and an undershirt, she in a calico dress. They had the faces of my cousins.

"Helena! Bright star!" the woman cried, reaching toward us.

"Where have you been?" cried the man, opening his arms. "We've been waiting ages!"

"Mami! Papa!" Helena gave a choked sob and ran to them, was swallowed in their embrace.

Exiles. In death, were they still separated from the rest of us?

People make such separations, something whispered past my ear. *Most of us do not.*

My dream of a wasteland: a place I had sent myself?

Helena separated from her parents, came back to me. "Cousin Cyrus," she said. "Thank you. Thank you." She rose on tiptoe and kissed my cheek, a cold hard spot of pressure and then release. "Thank you for trying to help me," she whispered to Alma, kissing her too. Alma's fingers dug even deeper into my upper arm.

Helena darted back to her parents. They smiled at us, melted into each other, glowed brighter and brighter, then vanished in a final flare.

"What...happened?" Alma said.

I was not alone on a dead world now. Alma's grip convinced me I was alive and in company. "I guess they knew where they were going after all," I said, "once she came back to them." I felt a strange longing to go home myself, and see my sister and my parents and my cousins and aunts and uncles. Some of the people I had known were no doubt dead now, and some new ones had probably been born. I wanted to make sure the family was still where I had left it.

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"I don't mean what happened to them, the — the ghosts — I mean what happened? What happened this whole night? Who the heck *are* you, anyway?" Alma said. "And what were you talking about when you were saying all those things in that other language?"

People make such separations. Most of us do not.

There was family, and then there was family — all over the place. "I'll buy you coffee at Shari's and we can talk about it," I said, stooping to pick up her cane.

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

Rose Daughter, by Robin McKinley, Greenwillow, Sept 1997, $16.

Jovah's Angel, by Sharon Shinn, Ace, May 1997, $13.95.

Dogland, by Will Shetterly, Tor, June 1997, $25.95.

THERE IS something comforting about the shedding of outward appearance, or rather, the disregard of it in favor of interior nobility, that strikes a peculiarly resonant chord in me. That, and redemption through love. It seems fitting, just, an antidote to a world in which being a victim of fashion is a reason for existence and not just a hobby.

It should therefore come as no surprise that one of my favorite books ever is *Beauty*, authored by Robin McKinley a number of years ago. It is not a book whose details stay with me sharply, but rather a book whose shape and feel remain, and I've returned to it often during the past two decades, finding comfort and pleasure in both things remembered and things forgotten.

I have not, however, returned to it as the author.

Robin McKinley has.

I consider this an astonishing act of bravery. In a world where a trilogy is the ultimate act of selling-out to the nebulous fantasy mainstream, and originality is often more important than handling material well, returning to something you've already undeniably covered once, and unarguably covered well, seems to be asking for trouble.

I've seen authors flinch and turn away from something that, in my not so humble opinion, their hearts were in, for either of the two above reasons. I've seen them jump through hoops to come up with the latest Really Cool special effect, and I've seen them decry trilogies and explain, trip trip tripping over each word, why *their* works aren't

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in fact any such thing — although there are three books, in the same universe, that are, well, sequential. I find it embarrassing. It has an effect to me that's not dissimilar from an awkward teenager who can't quite admit that he really likes the school geeks and comes up with all sorts of atrocious reasons for keeping their company in the face of the taunts of his peers.

Not so Robin McKinley.

In her graceful afterward, she offers us both the tale of the genesis of her new book and a slice of her life — inseparable, of course — without apology. She's rewriting, or rather, retelling, the same story because that story has always been powerful to her, and it *still* speaks to her. Twenty years is a long time. Experience changes us, and wisdom adds a certain depth and resignation to our once bright hopes. It changes the way we perceive stories, stippling them with a different light, a different darkness.

It has been a few years since I've read *Beauty*. I almost went back to read it again first — but it wasn't time yet; I remember those things I love well enough, and I compare the new and the old with the distance of time and filter of experience, which in this case seems particularly fitting. I apologize in advance to Ms. McKinley, because a book should probably be looked at as an artifact in and of itself, and I'm comparing because I can't help but compare. I'm visiting a place I've not been for a while, with a different guide, and seeing things that I might have passed over with the old one.

So, on to *Rose Daughter*.

First, there are very few surprises; there were very few surprises in the first book. This is not a contemporary refashioning of an old myth, not a dark, Tanith Lee-like look at the underside or the darkness of the tale. Second, McKinley's writing hand is still incredibly gentle. There are no Evil Sisters here (an invention I always disliked, possibly because in our family I was the oldest and fated by fairy tale to always be the uglier, weaker and more oppressive of the sisters), no family split by bickering greed. And third, there is the rose, there is the beast, and there is a young woman who is willing to make sacrifices to save those things she loves. There is, of course, the just ending.

But there are differences, and one of the strongest is the way every sentence and every occurrence seems infused by magic. Not by the patina of magic, not by that Hollywood flash and dazzle — but by a

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deeper, older, wilder magic, a subtlety of living things. The first book had magic in theory, as you don't get men turned into beasts, talking invisible people and libraries that bring books from the future (although the library that I remember so fondly is gone, alas), but although all evidence of magic was there, that sense of *other* that defines magic wasn't.

In *Rose Daughter* it is. From the opening hint of the scent of roses which comfort a nightmare to the closing page, there is a sense of things we can touch but cannot fully control; things we can change, but not without being changed in our turn.

The cottage which a newly impoverished family repairs to, and repairs, is a wonder of atmosphere, and better, a place around which roses will bloom. In this universe, roses are creatures that require either magic or love to grow. Rather like the story itself.

Beauty's Beauty was a daydreamer, a woman who loved books and stories and things of the mind: a younger woman's younger woman. *Rose Daughter*'s Beauty is a quiet doer, a woman who falls in love with gardening, who spends her time with dirt under her fingers and her knees in damp soil, working against the grief and shock of loss, and finding that that work is good.

I don't know that the younger McKinley was capable of the shadows and light that strobe this second Beauty's simple, determined efforts, but in this novel it's the effort, the struggle to nurse life along, to bring it out, to make it bloom, that grounds the story.

I will keep this book.

I will reread it, time and again; it has earned its place as one of my odd coterie of bedside companions.

And I will look forward to the day, twenty years from now, when I pick up Robin McKinley's new book, and in it, waking again like a slumbering, glorious beast, if you'll pardon the expression, *Beauty and the Beast* raises its head again and roars.

Sharon Shinn returns to a world of her own making as well, in *Jovah's Angel*. It isn't a continuation of the first book, and I felt that minor twinge of disappointment at not returning to greet those characters that I'd become quite fond of. Never mind. Shinn has created a whole new cast of characters, and they have — underpinned as they are by both her graceful prose and her great

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affection for them — won me over just as thoroughly.

A word. If you haven't read *Archangel*, there is no reason whatsoever not to read *Jovah's Angel*. It stands alone. I urge you to read both, of course, but it's not necessary.

Delilah is the Archangel, the angela who has been selected to lead the people of Samaria. She is perfect: beautiful, attractive, charismatic, razor-edge smart about politics. If she has flaws, they are a rather justified pride and a willful belief in her own invulnerability. She is the best. She's been chosen by God. She has no doubts at all.

Alleluia is about as far in the other direction as you can get and still have an angel. Bookish, meek, underconfident, she is pale and ethereal, almost invisible in the light of Delilah's heavenly fire. But she, too, can be heard by the God.

But when Delilah dares a storm, it breaks her — by breaking her wing. Crippled, she is summarily dismissed by Jovah, and Alleluia, — or Alleya as she is more comfortably called — is chosen to replace her.

Okay; you can get that much information, differently worded, from the back of the book itself. But Shinn and McKinley have, in common, some of the same gentleness, and the same affection, for their characters. Perhaps Delilah's fall is unavoidable — but she doesn't abandon Delilah; rather, she intertwines the fallen Archangel's story with the struggling Archangel's story as the two women grapple with fate, fear and bitterness.

Delilah as a character had no equal in *Archangel*. She's angry, all right, and she's lost all faith — just as Raphael, in *Archangel*, did. But instead of descending into destructive madness, she descends into self-destructive bitterness, trapped by her crippling injury and what it's taken from her, but not — perhaps — completely lost. Still, she makes mockery of everything that she once felt herself to be, and she's found singing bawdy songs, and reveling in subtle degradation, in the world's equivalent of a cabaret act.

Maybe she'd be lost entirely — a villain, of a sort — but there's one young man, Noah, who comes to see her because he's hopelessly in love with her. Not the Archangel, but her, what he thinks he sees beneath everything else she's protected herself with. And where she can be cruel to cynics and money mongers and intellects she can't quite bring herself to abuse someone who's so true in intent, and so heartfelt.

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Love is a salvation of a type — possibly the only human salvation — if it takes you outside of your own intense self-pity.

The story of Alleya, which is arguably the more important of the two for the sake of the world, and the story of Delilah, cross paths because of Caleb, an engineer friend of Noah's, who is also dumbstruck and awestruck by the angela Alleya. Alleya is pure of heart, humble where Delilah is proud, soft where Delilah is fierce, meek where Delilah is aggressive — but she is never self-righteous, and her admiration for Delilah, her certainty that Delilah was the right angel for the job, is the clearest indicator of how very practical she is. Which is good, because Jovah is only listening to one angel, and at that moment it's Alleya, and if she doesn't figure out why, Samaria is doomed under her reign.

Shinn doesn't humble or elevate either of her two Archangels. There are broad romantic elements here, but there are also subtle character elements that give a cozy book its delightful edges. So far, with me at least, she's three for three, and I am eagerly waiting for her fourth novel, whatever that might turn out to be.

***

Shetterly's return is not to a world he's created before — but it feels very much to this reader that it's a return to a world he's lived in. You've got to have crossed the threshold between coming-of-age and being of age before you can look back on the truths of childhood — all its awkwardness, all its delights, all its injustices which, writ so large in your life at that time bear significance out of proportion to the events themselves — and see their place in your life so clearly.

This is a wise, wise book, seen through the eyes of a man who has enough of the boy he was then in him — four-year-old Chris, oldest of three children — to give you a glimpse into the wonder and strangeness of a child's fear, a child's magic. The first person narrative is perfectly suited to the vignettes that become the story itself; it wanders in that familiar, comfortable way that a story does when it's told between friends.

Luke H. Nix and his wife Susan travel to Florida at a time when segregation was in force. Susan's afraid of rattlesnakes, and it turns out with damned good reason — but in saving a loved one's life, Luke meets the people who are going to be the crux of his existence: Ethorne, a black man, and Mrs.

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DeLyon, a Seminole woman who owns the motel, Fountain of Youth.

Luke takes on as help — at a white man's pay — Ethorne and his family, Seth, Mayella, and James. Add to that a young girl — at her age, she can hardly be called a woman — who's willing to do "nigger jobs" for "nigger wages" to support her family because her husband is above that sort of work and she's desperate, and a bigoted man and his wife, and you have the staff of Dogland, a place that will one day — if Luke's plans hold — have one of every acknowledged breed of dogs in existence.

And you have love, forbidden love: love that crosses racial lines and love, hinted at but hampered by viewpoint, that crosses marital lines.

But a child's life is absolutes, and in Dogland, Chris, Little Bit and their baby brother Digger are those children, anchoring the themes of religion, tolerance, hope and success as the visitors to Dogland pass through. We have Nick Lumiere (a play on the name Lucifer), Joe and Mary, sans son, the old Norse gods — none of whom are ever named, and we also have Mrs. DeLyon, who I'd bet money was descended from Galahad's side of the family.

There's just so much in this book, in the racial tensions and the marital tensions, the crises with school bullies and the inevitable fight with very traditional parents — father's the disciplinarian here — that's *real* that the magic seems an effect of the childhood itself.

You can't read it quickly — well, you can, but it's a waste of a wonderful book's shadows, nooks and crannies. Take time, explore it, return a moment to your own memories of childhood's triumphs and fears.

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BOOKS

DOUGLAS E. WINTER

"From even the greatest of horrors irony is seldom absent."

—H.P. Lovecraft, "The Shunned House"

Hello Dolly:

WHAT DIVINE madness led the scientists who "cloned" the first mammal through nuclear transfer from an established cell line to name their firstborn...Dolly? Eager to endear the great unwashed to their little lamb (and, apparently, to honor a country music star), the scientists of the Roslin Institute seemed oblivious to the wicked irony that their cosy, seemingly innocuous name was the diminutive for a human replica — a doll — which did nothing to resolve the confusion of hope and fear that accompanied their breakthrough.

As the usual suspects chewed the media carpet with ever more moral soundbites about the cloning of humans (a favorite bit of blather came from Roslin Institute's own Ian Wilmut, who pronounced that human applications would be "quite inhuman"), a more sincere and perceptive dialogue was evolving in a series of novels written well in advance of Dollydom.

With its precise and provocative title, Michael Marshall Smith's *Spares* (Bantam, $22.95) confronts the gory glory of cloning; but for Smith, the cultivation of human replacement parts is merely the jumping-off point for a grand cross-genre adventure. Hardboiled narrator Jack Randall is the next century's Mike Hammer, a quixotic gumshoe with a heart of tarnished gold who staggers and shoots his way through a mystery that proves inescapably his own. A certified Mr. Ex (ex-soldier, ex-cop, ex-husband), Randall has fallen from grace to duty at the Farm, where he shepherds and soon liberates a flock of childlike clones who were created to serve as living donors for their wealthy owners. With its futuristic

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noir and the pursuit of replicants through a third-mall-from-the-sun setting, the opening act of *Spares* seems uncomfortably close to the motion picture *Blade Runner;* but Smith is merely warming up. There is remarkable energy and diversity here, and the plot soon spans several novels in its complexity, unraveling into a Vietnam allegory that underscores the pervasive theme of dehumanization. Although it's a curious criticism, Smith's enthusiasm proves the novel's only palpable weakness: his prose is not always tight, not always willing to stop, and its exuberance occasionally overwhelms his characters.

The moral and ethical quandaries of human cloning are ratcheted toward the metaphysical plane in *The Genesis Code* (Fawcett Columbine, $24.95), a spy-fi thriller by the pseudonymous John Case that barely survives its disingenuous prelude (in which a priest must disclose a profound secret to the church hierarchy but not to the reader, since it is the linchpin of the plot). Astute readers will soon guess the details, which involve a series of mother/child murders and a fertility clinic whose founder once tested Catholic relics for authenticity. The prose is strong and the machinations clever, but what is frankly astonishing is Case's failure to explore the spiritual underpinning of his plot. The result is a textbook thriller, one of those prototypical page-turners that runs like a finely tuned machine: all momentum and no soul.

Case could learn much from the sparse yet intense wordwork of M. John Harrison, whose *Signs of Life* (St. Martin's Press, $21.95) is a delicate and quietly desperate story of the doomed love affair between a worldly courier (and sometime disposer of medical waste) and a beautiful younger woman whose fantasies of flight mask a pained urging for transformation.

A defining myth of nineties fantasy is that body alchemy is the palliative for the mundane: modern primitivism as spiritual Tylenol. In *Signs of Life,* Harrison considers DNA as the imperfect clay of transformation, the opportunity for human flesh to adopt the characteristics of other species; but he offers no airy-faery optimism, finding queasy parallels between DNA-enhanced cosmetic surgery and the dumping of toxic waste. His stance is far from reactionary: Our actions, Harrison reminds us, have moral consequences that often differ from their moral causes. We live in a

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world that is littered with the detritus of good ideas and even better intentions. *Signs of Life* is thus far more than a cautionary tale; it is a critique of the exaltation of symbolic change — whether pierced eyebrow or scientific breakthrough — and the mindset that confuses revolution with evolution.

Those unfamiliar with Harrison's prodigy might grasp, however inaccurately, at "Ballardian" as descriptive shorthand for the obsessive apocalypticism in *Signs of Life;* but Harrison is like J.G. Ballard only in his defiant originality. Indeed, Ballard's latest, *Cocaine Nights* (HarperCollins/Flamingo, £16.99), is a disturbing retirement gothic that echoes, if anyone, Shirley Jackson. At its heart is a dire take on the fatal blessing of social conformity: humanity as the stuff of tour groups and shopping malls, a grand experiment in behavioral conditioning — or, indeed, psychological cloning. When the club manager at a tony Spanish coastal resort is charged with murder and proves unrepentant, his naive brother seeks to pierce the veil of sunshine and the blasé but finds himself slowly but surely taking his brother's path to perdition. Ballard's sardonic narrative transforms sun, sand, and savoury into the rotting castle of the *fin de siècle* psyche, and the sense of inevitability creates a splendid antimystery in which crime is the solution: "Politics is over...it doesn't touch the imagination any longer. Religions emerged too early in human evolution — they set up symbols that people took literally, and they're as dead as a line of totem poles. Religions should have come later, when the human race begins to near its end. Sadly, crime is the only spur that rouses us."

The mythology of transformation is dealt another cruel, and yet comic, blow in Jonathan Coe's *The House of Sleep* (Viking UK, £16.99). Coe, an intoxicatingly inventive writer, penned the delightful "Old Dark House" homage *What A Carve Up!* (based on the eponymous 1961 Sidney James/Kenneth Connor film and issued in the U.S. as *The Winshaw Legacy*), and his structural conceits are deft and refreshing. With its odd-numbered chapters set in 1983-84 and even-numbered chapters set in 1996, *The House of Sleep* is a twisted inversion of "Big Chill" nostalgia, a then-and-now tapestry of the lives of university chums and lovers whose abiding tie is sleep. Their former school residence houses a sleep research clinic, and it is here, at the intersection of

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dreams and reality, that even identity is at risk.

Mirage by F. Paul Wilson and Matthew J. Costello (Warner, $23) follows a similar trajectory, deepening the medical inquiry from sleep into coma in what could be read as an extended allegory on clueless postmodernism. What is "cloned" in these pages is human consciousness and memory: An experimental project (a benevolent one, for a change) allows the mapping of a person's "memoryscape" via computer, offering scientists a virtual reality of literal and symbolic imagery for analysis and interaction. When a researcher's twin sister is found comatose and dying, the technology is the only apparent solution, but memory and reality soon collide, and layers of illusion — the mirage of memory and its manipulation — are revealed. This is high entertainment, and one of the more inventive medical thrillers to come along in years.

Goodbye Dolly:

The birthing of that little lamb in Scotland also signals an apocalyptic urgency, one that takes its themes beyond the cautionary and into the eschatological. The millennial timing is part of the passion, of course, but consider the ironic evocation of the biblical: The lamb is symbolic throughout the Testaments, and notably in the delirious *Revelation of St. John*. What, indeed, should we make of a vision that claims "I saw a lamb standing as if it had been slain"? If the crucial mythic resonance of cloning is that of meddling with the scheme of things, then inevitably we must consider the wages of our sin.

The pall of armageddon descends upon the human and animal kingdoms in Mayra Montero's elegant *In the Palm of Darkness* (translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman, HarperCollins, $21). This bleak and genuinely horrific novel entwines the stories of an American herpetologist and his native guide as they scour the Haitian highlands in search of the *grenouille du sang*, one of the several species of frogs that have disappeared in the waning years of the Twentieth Century. What the two men discover, among tales of violence and voodoo, is a more profound erasure of the dignity and purpose of life — and of death.

Lives of the Monster Dogs by Kirsten Bakis (Farrar Straus and Giroux, $23) was published with outlandish hubbub ("a first novel like no other...the most arresting and brilliant fictional debut of

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1997") but without a nod to its roots: the novel is very much like others, including a first novel called *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* and, more specifically, *The Island of Dr. Moreau.* Bakis's premise is enticing: One fine day in 2008, Manhattan is visited by a parade of well-dressed canines who talk, have hands, walk on their hind legs and promptly check in at the Plaza Hotel. The story of their genesis and genocide is elaborated in epistolary prose that meanders preciously toward a doggystyle "Masque of the Red Death." The "monsters" are the legacy of a visionary vivisectionist, and their curious aristocracy — they sip tea, pen operas, and finally construct a castle on the Lower East Side — is a facade; soon they succumb to a strange and suicidal malady that is an unthinkable regression to brutality (which, like their obsession with culture and ritual, is depicted as human in character). Bakis cannot be blamed for publishing hype, but her style is mannered to the point of a creepy fashion statement, striving mightily to suggest that she has something important to say when she merely has something important to repeat.

Far more successful as fantasy and parable is Elizabeth Hand's powerful and affecting *Glimmering* (HarperPrism, $22). The novel is a high-risk maneuver, proposing an alternate history of the nineties that concludes with a bang in 1999, when our mathematically challenged population intends to celebrate the century's end, and the Millennium, on a December 31 that is one year early. Hand's mirrorworld is clouded with despair, the aftermath of manmade and natural disasters that seem to signal The End: "What they had all been waiting for, consciously or not — the whip coming down, the other shoe dropping, the sound of sixteen hooves beating measured and far off upon the tarmac, still distant but not for long. The sound of something chipping at the earth as though it were an egg; the sound of the fabric of the century being torn."

It is a world infected by science, and through its shadows walk Jack Finnegan, dilettante of that dying artform known as the written word, and Christian rock star Trip Marlowe, each seeking an evermore elusive element of life: meaning.

The often overrated art of "worldbuilding" is a staple of fantasy, part of the generic hustle that serves too many writers as the means of escape from (or avoidance

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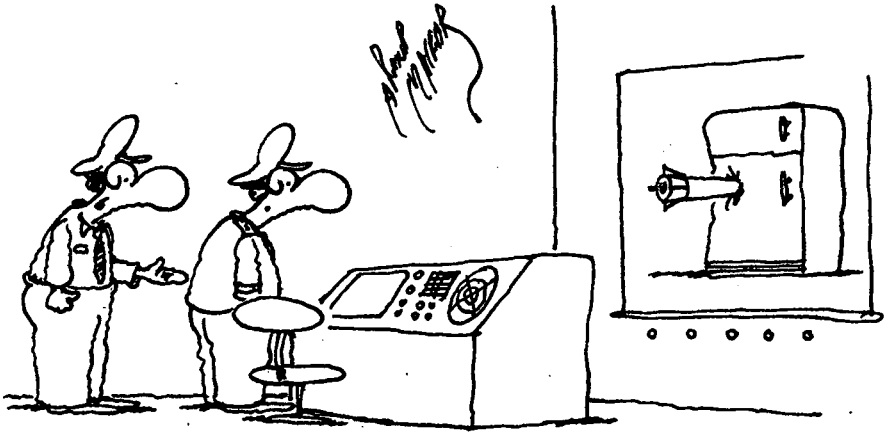
of) reality. But Hand's reinvention of the 1990s is an astonishment, an exquisite and extended metaphor intended to bring focus to millennial America: In these pages she wrestles with the relentless agonies of the soul in overload; government through multinational enterprise and media manipulation; the primacy of image over substance, sex over senses, life over living. Ironically, she offers, as an aside, the DNA-based cosmetic surgery that is crucial to *Signs of Life;* and she also proposes a mass media "clone" — an "icon" — by which the public image of a motion picture or rock star is given electronic life, the ultimate MTV video puppet. Imagery, she reminds us, is not identity; and it is our relentless pursuit of the external that is our doom.

Glimmering is a brooding elegy, but within its funereal shroud is a moving story of life in the midst of death that is a worthy bookend to Clive Barker's *Sacrament* (1996). Those who would criticize its dour musings (preferring, no doubt, the vapid fantasyland of happy endings) are unwilling to accept the healing power of darkness or to acknowledge that most elegant of ironies: The best fiction is that which offers truth. ☞

Douglas E. Winter
Oakton, Virginia
July/August 1997



"There are still some glitches in our heat-seeking missile project, General."

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Technology continues hurtling us into the future as fast as it can—faster than many of us would like. Here Dale Bailey takes a moment to imagine poetically what that future might hold for some of the people who have paved its way.

Night of the Fireflies

By Dale Bailey

AT JUST AFTER NINE ON A warm midsummer night, Raymond Hollis dotted a final "i," crossed two "t's" with a single flourish, and set aside, along with his antique ballpoint pen, the work of half a lifetime. Sighing, he lifted the final page, turned it facedown atop the manuscript, and squared the edges. Then he sat for a moment, gazing pensively into his dim study. Beside him, atop a bookcase stuffed with crumbling aromatic volumes, a small lamp burned; on the desk, six fireflies battered at the walls of a plastic jar.

Hollis let his gaze wander to the open window. More fireflies — dozens of them — whirled and eddied there, tracing oddly formal patterns in the dark. Occasionally, one bumped against the screen, staring in at him.

"Telephone, please," Hollis said.

Circuits chittered and hummed. A watery column of light dropped from the ceiling. "What number, please?"

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"Oh, anyone. Anyone who would be interested."

Silence. The house was immune to irony; it clothed and fed him, would sing to him or rock him gently to sleep if he wished, but it could do nothing more. Nothing that mattered.

"What number, please?"

Hollis spoke the number aloud.

The light flickered. Instantaneous connections fell into place. A phone uttered its cicada rattle, and then a face appeared, three-dimensional in the column of light.

"Done," Hollis said. "Blake, it's done."

"Done? Really done?"

"That's right. After all these years..."

"How does it feel?"

Wonderingly, Hollis said, "I...don't know." Then: "Would you like to see it?"

"I can be there in thirty minutes."

The light flickered and deliquesced. Hollis gazed at the manuscript for a moment; then he lifted the jar of fireflies and started down the hall. He paused at the door to his second office, the one where he made his living — a bright space with terminal and chair and shining liquid crystal walls — and thought of the work that awaited him: images and sound bites and snippets of disembodied text to be arranged and indexed into the web of other such fragments, themselves arranged and indexed by other such men in other such rooms in a thousand different places around the world.

Hollis turned away.

At the front door, he stepped outside. The moonlit dark murmured with air conditioning and the thousand rustles of mechanical mice, grooming lush grass. In the neighboring houses, remote on immaculate squares of green, blind windows flickered with phantoms from the liquid crystal walls.

The neighborhood — the street, the houses, the lawns themselves — projected a bland identity. It was the miracle of the age that geography — language, culture — no longer mattered. Turn on the walls in Spain, in Australia, in Nairobi, and navigate the same scrolling nets of information as your neighbors in Brazil and Romania and Japan. Jump on the web in the city of angels and jump off in Addis Ababa — it was all the same web.

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But tonight — Hollis gasped — tonight, magic!

Fireflies — not dozens, not hundreds, but thousands! — spun and danced in those oddly inevitable patterns. They glimmered and flickered and traced bright paths against the night. Gazing at them, Hollis remembered slipping swiftly through warm summer nights, hands outstretched to trap the bright insects in a mason jar, beacons for the haunted boyhood dark. Lightning bugs he had called them then, and the notion still appealed to him — tiny insects, translucent bellies aflame with summer fury. Bottled lightning. Magic.

"Go on," he said as he peeled back the plastic lid. One by one the fireflies hurled themselves into that stiff quadrille. A single insect lingered on the lip of the jug, delicate antennae reading the air. Hollis nudged it with his index finger. The firefly winked furiously, rocketing before his face to disappear amid the thousand flaring sparks.

Hollis sighed, thinking of Blake.

They had met at a party years ago. While the rest of the party — the rest of the world — gathered entranced before the walls — the stunning new four-way liquid crystal walls with their illusion of depth, of reality — Hollis and Blake had retreated to the fastness of the porch and there, like fellow spies long sought for in a hostile land, exchanged their tokens of recognition.

"I've often seen a cat without a grin — " Blake had said.

" — but a grin without a cat!" Hollis had responded.

And then, together: "It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!"

The two men paused for a moment, breathless, afraid to believe.

"No," Hollis had whispered.

"Yes," Blake said. "Yes, yes, *yes!*" He capered and danced, crying, "During the whole of a dull, dark, and — "

" — soundless day in the autumn of the year!"

"It is the flag of my disposition — "

" — of hopeful green stuff woven!"

Blake said, "It was the worst of times," and Hollis had shouted aloud, "Oh, no it was the best of times," and swept the other man into a delighted embrace. For it *was*, it *was* the best of times. After a lifetime of looking for a fellow book-lover in a world that had no use for books — in a world

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that watched and listened and surfed the endless cybernetic wave — Hollis at last had found a friend who read.

Remembering, he felt a small frisson of that old joy.

Just then a shiny mechanical beetle slid noiselessly down the street and stopped before Hollis's house. Blake. Hollis trembled, full to bursting with a life's enthusiasm, anxious to share it at last. He wanted to shout aloud, to sound his barbaric yawp across the rooftops of the world and wake his neighbors up!

Then the beetle's moonlit carapace slid aside, and his heart went cold within him.

Two men came to him across the grass: Blake, squat as a fireplug, and another man, tall and cadaverously thin, with praying mantis grace. Moonlight collected on the stranger's wide shoulders and flashed from his grinning ivory teeth. His eyes burned in the shadow of his fedora.

Hollis gasped as if gut-punched. The plastic jug slid from his nerveless fingers.

"Blake?" he said.

Through the spinning motes of the fireflies, Blake came to him, followed by the thin man.

"Blake? You were supposed — that is — I thought you would come alone."

Still Blake said nothing. A breeze lilted through the night, hurrying the grass blade by blade before it, like a long wave rolling endlessly to shore. In the windows of the nearby houses, the liquid crystal phantoms gyrated and threw out grasping fingers. Fireflies carved hieroglyphs in the air, flickering trails that burned with strange significance. The air smelled of oil and polished steel.

The two men paused where he stood before his open door. The breeze seized the plastic jug and tumbled it away.

"What is it?" Hollis said. "Blake?"

"Shall we step inside?" the stranger said, his voice reedy and passionless, with a core of iron.

They stepped in. None of them bothered to shut the door. The living room was an alien place to Hollis. He recognized nothing about it. The night had followed them in.

"Blake," Hollis whispered and the word died on his lips. It trailed into

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the night, dissipating, remote as the cry of a hunted beast across a moonlit hill.

But stalwart Blake said nothing.

Hollis drifted away from the two men, the thin stranger and the old friend — his *only* friend — become a stranger now, silhouetted against the moonlight in his wide-standing door.

"What do you want?" Hollis said.

"Are you Raymond Hollis?"

"I should be asking who you are. What gives you the right to come in here like this? Blake — "

The thin stranger looked at Blake. "Is this the man?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Hollis, if you'll come with us."

Hollis did not move. He stood in the center of the room, surrounded by the liquid crystal walls, their surfaces silvery and inert.

"Where? Why?"

"Mr. Hollis, please."

"*Why?*"

"What is the First Principle, Mr. Hollis?"

Hollis had another flash from his childhood, his rote recital of the principles in a chill and shining classroom. But the words would not come to his lips.

Quietly, as if explaining something to a recalcitrant child, the thin man said: "Democracy, Mr. Hollis, that is the First Principle. And democracy means always having the right to choose."

"But I haven't..."

"How have you passed your nights these last years?"

"I — writing. Blake, *please*..."

But Blake's silent shade was retreating down the hall, toward the study.

"Writing, Mr. Hollis?"

"Writing — just writing."

"And what did you write?"

"A story, a novel — "

"In that story — that novel — who decides what happens, Mr. Hollis? Who decides how things come out?"

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"I do. It's what I do, I'm a writer."

"A content provider, Mr. Hollis."

Hollis thought of his long days indexing the countless snippets of music and speech and text that flowed to him through the walls. All those billion fragments sewn together in an endless web, every fragment a bridge to everywhere and nowhere, journeys without destination, guided by no shaping artist's hand. The men and women and children, the fathers and mothers, the sons and daughters who day and night gazed transfixed into the liquid crystal walls — let *them* choose. Let them navigate their own journeys, a million unknown ways, guided by a million idiosyncratic interests. No place anymore for a story to be *told*, the First Principle decreed.

"Yes," he whispered, "but a writer, too."

"What gives you the right? Why should you choose what direction the story should take?"

"Alone, in private, I have sought no reader."

The thin man threw back his head. A thin cry erupted from his throat, and now through the open door the fireflies came pouring — more fireflies than Hollis had ever seen or imagined, whirling and spinning, abdomens glitteringly alight in their endless cotillion. They swarmed about the thin man, alighting by the thousands upon his outflung arms and hands, his face and neck, the brim of his fedora — everywhere — until the black oval of his mouth alone remained, an inky vacuum in the pulsing glare, giving vent to that eerie and accusing cry. Once again, Hollis had that sense of angular hieroglyphs, bright with a significance that still defied him, carved into the darkling air.

Hollis staggered back as the liquid crystal walls boiled to life, drowning the moon-splashed room with double, treble, endlessly replicating images of his own worried face. Through the distorting plastic lens of the firefly jar he had placed on his desk, Hollis watched himself set aside the antique ballpoint pen; through the intervening mesh of window screen studied his own pensive gaze into the light-starved study; in a spinning vertiginous flash saw himself standing before his door, his face looming down, magnified and distorted as the harvest moon by the firefly camera circling by — a spinning kaleidoscope of images. From a dozen firefly angles, he witnessed the damning moment, his crime. Again and

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again, from each of the surrounding walls, he saw himself lean forward and speak the words into the phone's flickering column of light —

Would you like to see it?

Would you like to see it?

Would you like to see it?

Blake, he thought. I trusted you —

A single firefly barreled past him, mesmerized by the thin man's pulsing form. Hollis's hand shot out and closed around the winking insect, crushing it. Then, in the glare of that strange pulsing light, he leaned forward to study the remains scattered piecemeal across his tremulous palm. His breath caught in his throat as all at once the significance of those glowing hieroglyphs, that queerly automated dance, came clear: shiny cogs and gears spilled from the creature's shattered thorax; the extruding lens of a single camera eye stared up at him, bound to the wreckage by a shining filament of wire.

The thin man's piercing cry fell to silence. The lurid walls flickered into gray. The cloud of fireflies funneled away as they had come — out the open door and into the moonlit sky.

And then they came for him, the thin man with his predatory grace, Blake like an apparition from the darkened hallway, the manuscript folded carefully against his breast. Gentle hands, but resolute, closed about his arms.

"No, please," he said as they led him across the lawn.

But they turned upon him their flat, affectless eyes, saying nothing, and for the second time that night, Hollis caught the scents of oil and polished steel. Summer wind tore at the pages of his manuscript as the translucent carapace of the beetle slid into place above him. And then they were speeding silently away. Hollis glanced back, but all the houses looked the same. The fireflies were gone and nothing moved but a single scrap of paper, rising and twisting in the moonlit dark before the wind harried it away.

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Here's a story about a woman you might call the salt of the earth, and about the strange object she found within the earth (and what she then found within herself).

The Singing Thing

By Lynn B. Coulter

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY YOU are hoeing sweet taters out of the dirt when you hear one commence to moan. Oh, some will say my hair's white as salt nowadays, and figure, old woman like me has been farming under this Alabama sun too long. They'd say it's melted my brains into a runny-puddle, like store-bought ice cream. Well, it ain't. Folks think life's all about science, and medicine, books and such. Not all of it, though.

You listen. It happened like this.

I was fourteen when I married Ezra, a cotton farmer three times my age and not a bit of the child in him. I was not a happy bride, for I soon learned Ezra had married for a help-mate and not a wife. Evenings, he'd light a fire to chase the chill of the coming dark, but it never warmed me. I scrubbed my hands before every blaze he built, but it was flame without heat, light and smoke only, like love without wanting.

I wished I had Ma to counsel me, but she died before we wed. Hers was

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a hard life, but she found pleasure with her hands. Ma, see, was a potter. For her, pots rose true and strong. Sometimes we'd hear singing as she worked her wheel, but she'd say it wasn't her, that she was just letting loose the sound already in the clay. It was a gift she had, that singing thing.

After she died and I married, Daddy gave me her old wheel. Sometimes I sneaked out to Ezra's barn to spin it, but it was no use. My pots flopped and fell. Ezra didn't like my potting; I was a wife now, he said, and I'd have to help him and stop playing patty-cakes with mud. I tried not to miss what I didn't have, thinking if I worked hard at the land, we'd make a good life.

That first summer of our married life passed quick, and by fall, Ezra made ready to take our cotton to sell in town. "More rain's coming," he said one morning. He stopped to scrape a clod of mud off his boot. "You better dig them sweet taters before they rot."

He could make me feel like a fool. Still, lots of men sold goods in town this time of year, and I hoped he'd buy me a card of silver buttons while he was there. I'd been wanting them for a dress I sewed.

The day he was to go, I wrapped up a biscuit and poured some of Daisy's milk in a jar. Daisy didn't give like she should, but we couldn't afford another cow. He'd stop at a boarding house for supper and not be home till the next night.

I watched him ride off without a backward glance for me, then tied on my bonnet and set out to the tater patch. It was an Indian summer morning, poplars dropping leaves, squirrels gnawing twigs heavy with acorns. I knelt down and stabbed my tater fork in the ground, twisting it to rip out the taters' roots. I like sweet taters, all orangey inside, and after a while I started humming and forgetting any sadness. Clouds parted and sun came out, blistering my neck. Then it began to heat up. Sweat puckered my gown under my arms. Mockingbird had been singing with me from the trees, but he quit like it got too hot to sing.

A cloud rolled over the sun, giving it an odd look. Sun turned into a sunflower, black cloud in the middle like the flower's eye, and rays shooting out all around. I stood up, wiping sweat from my face with my gown-tail. Wind came up, nice breeze. Nobody around, so I lifted my

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skirts, let that air blow up my drawers, and while I was standing there, skirt to my waist, I heard a low moan.

Well, I dropped my skirt, whirled around. Squinted up against that sunflower sun, figuring it was the mockingbird wailing. But no, I saw him flap wings and fly away. And I heard that moaning sound again.

"Ezra?" I called, but nobody answered. "Who goes? Make yourself known." Nobody spoke. Just wind, whistling low. That blighted cloud kept its hold on the sun's face, rays shot out brighter, like it was pinching the sun's nose, and the moan came again, louder.

Hair prickled on my arms. I was scared. I was young and didn't know then that the scariest things you'll face in this life ain't usually boogiemen. "Who goes?" I hollered again, louder. I picked up my tater fork, held it above my head like I'd strike out. "Come out, wherever you're hiding."

"Here," somebody moaned.

"Where?" I saw nobody.

"Down here."

It was coming from below my feet. I dropped to my knees, laid my ear to the ground. It couldn't be, but it was. The ground was moaning. "Help me," it cried.

I scrambled aside from where I'd been digging, raked through the dirt, seeing nothing but the very tip-end of a tater, the pointy part, and I scratched dirt from around it.

"That's it," moaned the voice. "Loose this dirt, where I can breathe."

"Somebody under there? Who are you?"

"Ohhh, I'm a pitiful thing. Loose me, won't you?"

Well, I didn't know what I had dug up. Had somebody buried a man in my tater patch, trying to kill him, and I'd come along just in time? I chopped with my hoe.

"Stop!" it screamed. "That sharp thing is killing me! Dig me out gentle!"

I was shaking now, my heart thumping till I could feel the throb in my fingers, but I couldn't let somebody die down there in the dirt, could I? So I dug easy but quick, scraping with my fingers, uncovering — what? The toe of a shoe? A hat? How was it living, under heaps of dirt?

I got a piece uncovered big enough to wrap my hands around, and it looked like some kind of root, more turnip than tater. I grabbed hold and pulled with all my might.

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"Stop!" it screamed again. "Can't you see I am stuck down here, woman? You are about to pull my head off!"

Panting, I sat down. "Is this your head?" I prodded with my fork.

"Ouch." It groaned. "You're hurting me."

"How'd you get in such a mess? How are you living down there, all covered up?"

It sniffed. "They put me here. Buried me."

Something awful began to dawn on me. "Who put you there? Nothing can live buried, without air."

It said nothing.

"What are you?" I stuck my fork into the ground like I was done. "I ain't digging till you tell me who you are, and how you came here."

It sighed, a deep, sorrowful sound that heaved the dirt a little. "I'm Legion," it said.

"Have mercy!" I scrambled to my feet.

"Don't be scared. Don't run off, I won't hurt you. Can't, don't you see? I'm all buried. Please. I'm in a pitiful way."

It touched me, that voice. Like a child's.

"Please," it pleaded. "Just a little more digging."

"Are you telling me," I kneeled down beside the hole, "that you are a devil?"

A sassy tone come into its voice. "There's only one devil."

"Well. I've heard of Legion, and evil spirits being driven out of a boy into swine. Made them pigs mad, drove 'em over a cliff into the sea. So maybe you are a demon. But that killed all the demons, drowned 'em in the water."

It was quiet for a minute. Then the voice came again, bragging. "Everybody thinks we can't swim."

I held my reeling head. "I'm dreaming. Hallucinating, mad, out here in the hot sun."

It was quiet in my tater patch, just Legion sobbing every once in a while under the dirt, and me watching sweat bead off my face and splat onto my skirt. "So if you got run off a cliff inside a pig, how'd you end up in my taters?"

"It took years," it said, eager. "I've been lots of places. Last time I got cast out into this dirt. Now burying's different from water. Can't get out

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where you can't move, so I've been here many years, hoping rain and wind would wear it down and release me, like mountains rise out of the earth."

"But you ain't any mountain, and I don't think a decent woman should set something like you loose, do you?"

It considered. "I'm not bad anymore. I've been thinking for a long time. Moles have tunneled past me, raised their babies and moved on. Corn's tasseled above me, left roots and stalks to rot in the ground. I've seen seeds sprout, busting hard shells toward the sun. I want to come out, too, to go up in the air and the sun, with all that's living, and if it takes being good to do it, I'll do it. Please, wouldn't you set one of your own loose, if you could?"

Now that was the thing to say, and it knew it. Started me thinking about having to put Ma in that dirt, and how I did wish she was with me in the light and air.

"I'm even changing my name," it babbled on. "Not 'Legion' no more. Leon. Ain't that fine?"

I shook my head.

"Please," it coaxed. "I'll show you how good I can be. Name something you want, anything, and I'll do it. Only uncover my ears, at least."

"Tempting is sin."

"It ain't tempting. It'd be thanking you, for giving a poor, reformed creature another chance." I said nothing. "I'll show you," it promised, "how I've turned. That cow you've got? Daisy?"

This gave me pause. "How'd you know my cow, demon?"

"Leon," it snapped. Then its voice got honey-slick again. "She's been by. I feel her hoofbeats through the ground, hear you call her. Now I know she don't give much milk, so what if she gave more? No, she'll give cream." He was excited now, chattering. "You can sell it in town, help make a living."

I thought on this a spell. It did seem harmless enough. "And what do I have to do for you?"

"Why, nothing," it said, surprised. "'Cept, just uncover me to my ears. Then maybe you'll come and see me again tomorrow."

That wouldn't hurt that I could see, so I scraped with my hands till I got the head out. And lo and behold, it looked like a man, yet none I'd

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ever seen. Its face was round as a new moon, yet blank somehow, a slate you could make a mark on. It blinked, big tears welling up.

"Oh," it said, "I'm so grateful. You'll see, that cow'll squirt pure cream for you in the morning. What a kindness you've done. Just come back tomorrow, won't you?"

I carried my basket of taters on my hip and headed home, promising nothing, not sure whether I'd done good or bad this day. Let Ezra worry with it when he come home, I figured. I had clothes to scrub. I was through with demons.

Ezra didn't come home that night, of course, and when I woke next morning, I thought I'd had a crazy dream. "Too much sun," I told the cat that lived off the mice in our barn when I went to milk Daisy. "Ezra'd lock me in the mad-house." I scooted a stool beside Daisy's warm hide. Her breath was a cloud in the cold air. I pinched her teat between my fingers and squirted milk into my tin bucket, whssh, whssh.

Then I stopped. It got quiet. Pigeons fluttered in the rafters over my head. Cat dived for something in the hay, missed, come up sneezing from the hay-seed. A ray of sun stabbed through a crack in the roof above us, lit up Cat's black fur. She come over to me and I felt of her hair, all warm where the light had been playing. "Cat," I said, "do you suppose?" I dipped my finger into the bucket and touched it to my lips. It was pure cream.

So I was digging up a demon in my sweet potato patch.

I carried my cream to the kitchen, filled me a jelly jar and Cat a saucer and sat down to drink. She drank all of hers, too, then sat cleaning her whiskers, studying me with slanty green eyes.

She came over to rub against my shin. "That was a treat," I warned. "Don't count on it every day, for you are no fancy-cat." She hopped into my lap and balled herself up for a nap, like she didn't believe a word of it.

I flung her off. "Shoo! I got no time for the likes of you." I slung the rest of the cream out the door, into a patch of violets growing by the steps, and wiped out my jar at the sink. Cat clawed to go out, and when I opened the door to let her, I saw what I couldn't believe. Them violets was blooming, and here it was fall, the flowers as wide across as your thumb is long, heart-shaped, and blue. Some of that cream had coated the leaves like candle wax and dripped slow onto the ground, like the plants was crying tears.

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It was noon before I got up my nerve to go back to the taters. Part of me was excited as a child with a birthday cake, part of me scared I was messing with something I didn't know about. Part of me was thinking, shovel more dirt on top of that thing, make him put Daisy back like she was, and part of me was remembering how I heard of Egyptian princesses so rich they bathed in cream. If he can make a cow give cream, I wondered, what else can he do?

When I came to my tater patch, I saw my demon laying there half-dug up, like a rock in a field. "You back?" it called, happy as a lover to see me. "Did you enjoy your cream?"

I stood over it, arms crossed over my chest, hardening my heart. "Plain folks don't need cream ever day."

"Then sell it. Pocket that money and surprise Ezra." He sighed. "He works so hard. Now will you set me loose?"

Well, I knew I had to be careful of what I was about to do. "Slow down a minute. How am I to know you're not tricking me, that I'm not setting sin loose on the world by digging you up?"

"Oh, sin's already loose. Think on it. It's living that sets sin loose. Ain't a newborn baby the most sinless thing you know? Then it gets to be a child that heaves a stone through a storefront window to steal a penny candy, or a woman that lies with another's husband, and by the time a man or woman's old and their backs are stooped and twisted, so are their hearts. No, living brings out sin. Preachers credit such as me way too much for evil."

Meadowlark on a far-off fence post started to sing. I sat on the ground and sifted dirt through my fingers, thinking. Dirt was full of shiny mica, like scales some silvery snake had shed. "You see?" asked Leon. "You'd be doing no harm. Uncover me a little more, see if you don't like me."

"Maybe if you would do me another favor."

Its lips turned up in a pretty smile. "Name it."

I looked toward the horizon, where I'd see Ezra coming home. "You could make Ezra buy those buttons I've been wanting."

"Is that all?" laughed my demon. "Why wait till he comes home?" When he spoke again, his voice was a whisper. "Put your hands to your collar. Don't look. Touch. Run your fingers down your shirt-front, slow."

I touched my collar. The little broke button that I knew was there, the

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one that pricked the hollow of my throat every time I bent over, was gone. I felt a new button, smooth as ice, damp as dew. I slid my hands down my shirt, both hands. Shivers run over me. What had he done? "I'm afraid to look," I cried.

"Just feel," said he. "You don't have to look."

I slid my hands low, lower, closed my eyes. Seed pearl buttons? I wondered.

"Plucked out of oysters' throats," he said, as if I'd spoken aloud.

I squeezed my eyes shut tight, rubbed up and down my shirt. Heat rose from me, shimmered in the air around me, like wheat waves in wind.

"Ain't you pretty? Ezra counts such a waste, don't he? But you'll turn his head when he sees you." He hummed a song I didn't recognize.

Old women say the devil sings church hymns backwards, and I stopped, scared. "But what'll I tell Ezra when he asks where these come from?"

"Why, say you found 'em." He slanted his eyes like Cat, looked at me sideways. "Ain't it true, you've found what you need?"

I couldn't speak, yet he kept talking. His voice came out of the trees all around me, like wind, whispering down, blowing, a strange and singing sound, but his lips quit moving. "Just like I hear Daisy's hoofs above me, I hear your heartbeats. Ezra doesn't give what you need, does he?"

I clapped my hands over my ears, squeezed shut my eyes, but he sang on. "There's Indians, some say, who fish with their own flesh. Cut strips of skin for bait in winter, when they can't find any other. Their arms and legs are pocked and puckered, their scars, wrinkled hollows. They do it to feed their families, they use up themselves, until they scrape the bone."

"I'm a good wife," I cried.

"You are," said he.

I slumped to the ground, dragged my shaking fingers through the dirt. "Reckon you can do lots of things, Mr. Leon. Do me one last thing, before I get my shovel. You see, Ma's buried in the ground, like you. What would you say to raising her up, as long as we are doing one another such favors?"

He clucked his tongue, smiling, and this time his lips moved. "Raising the dead, my, my. You've got me mixed up with Someone Else. I would if I could, of course. But I can do something about that potter's

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wheel you love so much." He stopped smiling, looked hard at me, his eyes glinting silver as that mica in the dirt. "Now dig me up."

He said this like he was commanding me to do it, when all he'd said before was so pretty and sweet. And I wanted to do it, I confess. Sunflower sun come back out, steam spewed from the earth. Sweat ran under my arms. I opened my mouth to say, "No," but nothing came out.

"Fetch a shovel," he said.

There was nothing to do but do it. I ran and grabbed a shovel and dug, him giving orders all the while, like I had no choice. I worked till I uncovered his hands, and then he started digging with me, pulling himself up, freeing one leg and then another, climbing out of his pit. His clothes were moldy and worn. Dirt caked his bare feet. Panting, he stretched out on the ground and closed his eyes, and I lay down beside him, my dress wet with sweat, fingernails broken from clawing, eyes gritty with sand.

Then he turned to me and smiled. He fingered those seed pearl buttons on my shirt, pulled gently and the threads broke, tumbling them into his hands. He opened his mouth and put one pearl on his tongue. When he leaned toward me, I heard the singing again. It was like he had tasted something sweeter than I'd ever known and wanted to share it with me, and, grateful, I took what he offered.

A WHISTLING WIND stirred me from a sleepless dream I'd fallen into. My demon was standing over me, and I jumped and clutched my clothes about me. "Where are you going?" I asked, teeth chattering, cold.

"Look." He pointed behind me.

I turned. On the horizon, the sun had spilt its yoke like a fertile chicken's egg, bleeding onto the road below it. Ezra's wagon was coming down that road, a shadow against the red. "Go to your barn," he said.

I scrambled to my feet. "Ma's wheel?"

He smiled and pointed to the barn. I pelted for it, threw aside the bolt that held the door and dropped to my knees beside the wheel. A lump of clay lay there, and I pressed my hands in it. And as I knelt there, my sweat melted that clay and the wheel began to spin. Faster and faster it spun, and the clay wasn't cold and slick anymore, but warm, like a living thing, like the heat of my hands was in it, and it wrapped around my fingers, forming

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over me. Shapes rose from it, the finest pots you'll ever see, and other things, things I didn't know and couldn't name, shapes that spun and shifted until they lifted off my wheel and whirled in the air before me. And in their dancing and whirling, the plate under my hands spinning, my hands gliding over the wet and slippery clay, I heard a voice, my voice, begin to sing.

Ezra said he found me sitting on the hay beside the wheel, all manner of strange and twisted forms of clay beside me. It seemed a long time since he'd come down the road, but he said he'd just seen me run to the barn. "Are you hurt?" he asked. He shoved one of the clay creatures with his boot, but it only rocked back and forth in the hay and did not budge. "What's this?" He stooped to pick up a pot as twisted as a snail's shell. "These pots won't hold."

I looked about me, and saw what I had done. "You're wrong," I said. "They'll hold."

That autumn passed to winter, then spring, and another summer. Once, only once, I tried to tell Ezra about what had happened, but his face went hard as the ground he plowed, and he said he didn't want to hear a foolish tale I'd dreamed.

So, friends, this is what you must know. Ezra chided me no more about potting. Every day I went back to that old wheel, and soon my pots lined the walls of the barn and filled every shelf in the house. I stacked pots between the beds of larkspur and rows of collards, and underneath the pecan trees growing along the road. People passing stopped to look, but no one bought. It did not matter to me. Ezra said my pots looked unnatural, but he left them alone. He left me alone. Aloneness rose in me over the years, strong as sap in spring, but it was not loneliness. I knew then it didn't matter, nor would it again, how cold Ezra lived his life beside me. Life's heat and fire was inside me. It had always been. I'd found my singing thing.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

TOUCHED BY AN...ALIEN

I HOPE THAT it's not heresy to admit in these pages, but I've always loved mystery fiction. The appeal is certainly easy to fathom. Traditional mystery stories comfort us because, although they admit that life is full of puzzling and frightening phenomena, they manage to explain it all away by the final page. Whodunnit? That's the main problem — and (in books and movies, anyway) quite solvable. The whys are sometimes a little harder to elucidate. But when the sleuth bothers to delve into motivations, they can usually reduce even the most "diabolical" plot to a few very human emotions: love, hate, jealousy, greed, and ambition. There are no Great Mysteries for a detective, only a series of small ones.

Not so in well-crafted science fiction and fantasy, books or film. (Which is why I feel such affection for *this* genre.) The concepts that must be understood, and the challenges that must be faced, go well beyond ordinary human experience. And, for that very reason, sf makes us question the meaning of our "humanity" beyond the limits of this small world.

2001 accomplished this. So did earlier classics like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. And that's why I have feared the obscene success of *Independence Day*. That loud, self-important, yet mindless megahit was sure to inform much of the cinema we will see during this sf boom we are entering. And what a sad waste that would be.

But, perhaps I was being overly pessimistic. Because this past summer's megahit in which Will Smith once again saved the planet from alien threat, *Men in Black*, was actually considerably better

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than *ID4*. At least it *meant* to be silly. And there was a spark of creativity (and even a touch of genuine irony) behind its humor and action. I also liked the fact that the aliens weren't inherently evil. Their agendas and their personalities were as varied as those of their oblivious hosts on this way-station, Earth.

But, as much as I enjoyed the absurdity of *Men in Black*, I couldn't help but wish for a science fiction film that wasn't driven by gimmickry, creature design, and fiery fx. I wanted to see an sf film do what sf was designed to do — provoke a thought, or two, or three. That's why I welcomed the appearance of *Contact* — a story that dared to put a little science back into science fiction.

This tale of radio (and, eventually, personal) communication with intelligent life from elsewhere in the universe was originally written in 1980 by Carl Sagan and his partner/wife, Ann Druyan, as a movie treatment. But their story's path to the screen was even rockier than little Sojourner's ramble on the surface of Mars. First, despite the enthusiastic sponsorship of Lynda Obst, the story languished in development hell for a few years. Then, in 1985, Sagan transformed it into a successful novel. Then, it fell back into the realm of Burbank beelzebubs for a few more years, with dozens of screenwriters taking a crack at Hollywoodizing Sagan's complex story. The film was finally greenlighted in 1993, with a screenplay by Michael Goldenberg (*Bed of Roses*), to be helmed by *Mad Max*'s George Miller.

Miller was eventually canned — some say for being more visionary than pragmatic about the project — as director. Then, Robert Zemeckis (of *Back to the Future*, *...Roger Rabbit*, and, of course, *Forrest Gump* fame) was put in charge. More tweaking of the screenplay ensued, with final writing credits going to Goldenberg and James V. Hart (*Hook*, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*).

Finally, in the summer of 1997 (six months too late for Carl Sagan to live to see it), *Contact*, the movie, premiered. And it *was*, at long last, a science fiction film that encouraged its audience to think a few Big Thoughts. Just not Big enough.

For, as is almost always the case when scores of Hollywood types whittle and fiddle with a challenging story, the Warner Brothers team that brought us this *Contact* significantly compromised the speculative force of Carl Sagan's

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original story, by trying to make sure its content and its heroine threatened no one.

Regarding the hero of *Contact*, a SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) radio astronomer named Dr. Eleanor Arroway, casting was most certainly *not* the problem. The filmmakers have been quoted as saying that they couldn't imagine anyone but Jodie Foster in the role of the questing scientist. In their case, those words are just flackery. Still, I'd have to agree.

There are plenty of youngish women in Hollywood who could have convinced us of their enthusiasm for the task of listening for transmissions from beyond. But there are practically none who actually seem like they're smart enough for the job. (And writing that makes me sadder than I can say.) Foster is a Yale-educated woman in real life, but that matters less than the seriousness and intellect she displays as both a performer and a person.

Foster has a rigorous mind and a resolute will. That makes her perfect to play Sagan's Ellie. But it makes her over-qualified to play Robert Zemeckis's lead.

For the movie *Contact*'s Dr. Eleanor Arroway is a bit of a lost soul who seems to be using the search for alien cultures as an excuse to try to re-connect with her long-dead Daddy (David Morse). This is established in an early sequence of heavy-handed foreshadowing calculated to tug every heartstring in the audience. A nine-year-old Ellie (played well by *Bastard Out of Carolina*'s Jena Malone) copes with her widowed father's sudden death by calling out for him on her ham radio. She is left in bereft silence.

There's nothing actually *wrong* with the scene. Except that it's a cheap shot that has little relation to Sagan's novel. Although the novel's Ellie does lose the man she believes to be her father at a young age, she still has a mother (with whom she has classic mother-daughter angst) and a "stepfather" who inadvertently spurs her girlish scientific ambition with his maladroit attempts to steer her toward a more feminine life.

The "motherless child"/orphan is a Hollywood cliche, designed to artificially inflate the sympathy of the audience. But Ellie, as played by the redoubtable Foster, doesn't need to be piteous for us to be on her side. And she doesn't need some deep-seated emotional loss to motivate her to achieve in the field of science.

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But the men who made this movie didn't trust us to like a capable, adventurous, intellectual woman. So they made Ellie pathetic, and then they made her powerless.

Time and again, their adult Ellie has her thunder stolen by her Machiavellian former administrator, David Drumlin (Tom Skerritt). Now, Dr. Arroway might have had to put up with Drumlin's abuse and cooptation when she worked under him at the Arecibo observatory. But years after they part company, and long after she has found private funding for her research, why, oh why, would she let Drumlin horn in when she discovers a transmission emanating from the vicinity of Vega? And why would she continue to let this man try to steal her glory and ruin her chances to be a space pioneer?

The answer is, she wouldn't.

Women in the science and technology fields certainly don't have it easy, even now. But it's doubtful that Arroway real-life counterparts like astrophysicist Jill Tarter, the director of the major SETI program called Project Phoenix, or Donna Shirley, the head of the Mars Exploration Program at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, achieved what they did by letting men walk all over them and their dreams.

And, played by a intrepid actor like Jodie Foster, it's hard to believe that Ellie Arroway would be such a wimp, either. She suffers in silence, and waits for the fates or other men to come to her rescue. Luckily for her, they do. Drumlin is killed in a terrorist attack. And a filthy-rich Howard Hughes-style bizarro named Hadden (John Hurt) comes through with big bucks and extravagant technology whenever she needs it. And as for emotional support, how about a sexy new-age Billy Graham? Palmer Joss (Matthew McConaughey) was dumped by Ellie after a one-night-stand years earlier, but that doesn't keep him from showing up, repeatedly, in times of crisis, to gaze soulfully into her eyes, and offer her a homespun homily or a ride into the sunset.

Ellie would be nowhere without her Daddy Warbucks and her hunky holyman. And her dependence on male championship is certainly exacerbated by her segregation from other accomplished women. In Sagan's novel, the President of the United States is a woman, drawn to the integrity and smarts of Dr. Arroway. (In the movie, the president is played by...Bill Clinton, in an unfortunate and jarring Gumpism.) The only woman politico in the film is a presidential advisor played by Angela Bassett — in another role that

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wastes her incredible talents. And when they finally get a chance for a quiet conversation together, what do these two female movers and shakers talk about? Why, where Ellie can shop for an alluring dress, of course.

But Ellie is isolated in an even more insidious manner, as a space explorer. In Sagan's novel, the building of the costly spacecraft/time-travel device, based on an alien manual, is a global effort. And when astronauts are chosen for the first mission to our faraway friends, it is a crew of five, from all around the globe, who climb on board. (These include, I might add, another top woman scientist and friend of Ellie's from India.)

On Planet Zemeckis, however, the trip to Vega is an American mission. And Ellie, when she goes, goes alone.

More evidence of Hollywood's insufferable cultural jingoism? Undoubtedly. And also of our need to see everything in terms of the individual. (Collective action is just not the stuff of the major studio flick.) But in the case of Ellie Arroway, the filmmakers had other motivations for isolating and weakening her. Theological motivations, of all things.

And of all the compromises of Sagan's story, it is this one that offended me the most. For the touchy-feely spirituality that the screenwriters superimpose upon this tale of intergalactic detente is a total subversion of Sagan's original intent.

Carl Sagan always acknowledged the sincerity of many "religious" people, and he recognized the psychological need behind world faiths. He was, nonetheless, an agnostic who saw religion as a dangerous and repressive commodity that was too often an enemy of science. (See his 1996 book, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark.*)

In a recent interview published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Jodie Foster spoke of how much she enjoyed her conversations with Carl Sagan during preproduction and the shooting of *Contact*. He told her his ideas of the "god of the gaps." We humans, Sagan believed, had filled in our gaps of knowledge "with the word 'God.' Why do birds fly? We don't know, God must be there." But as science has allowed us to fill in those gaps, "[t]he big question is where does God go?"

That *is* the $64 thousand question. And Carl Sagan's answer, never stated baldly, but easy enough to pick up from his speeches and writings, understandably threatened those involved in fundamentalist faiths. God was immaterial to him.

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And he saw "blind faith" as a great danger.

That message is there in the pages of *Contact*, as well as many of his other works. But you'd never know it from the Warner Brothers version of his story. Here, Sagan's agnostic Ellie seems to go through some odd cosmic conversion, in which she learns the value of blind faith.

During an Inquisition to decide who will be the sole emissary to our neighbors in the great beyond, Ellie flunks the questions about her religious faith. Set up by Palmer, she admits to finding a belief in God to be irrelevant to space exploration, and so loses her shot at being America's space ambassador.

At the time, it's unclear whether the movie believes that this is a deficiency on her part or not. But her reasons for concluding that science/knowledge is the only religion worth having are given far less screen time than the expediency and piety of those (including her earnest former lover) who would chastise her about the inevitability of God. (I liked the quoted statistic about 95% of the earth's population being believers. Whoever made that count is obviously including those of us who worship trees, volcanoes, chocolate chip cookies, and *Xena: Warrior Princess.)*

I will admit that the movie does lightly point up some extremes in modern religion. But a walk-on cultist terrorist, and Rob Lowe's cameo as a Ralph Reed-style Christian right-winger, are mere passing images. They don't stay with the viewer the way McConaughey's appealing leading-man pieties do. And they can't hold a votive candle to the crypto-religious impact of Ellie's meeting with her "alien" radio-pal.

After the dastardly Drumlin is offed, and Ellie gets her chance to zip through a wormhole to another world, she finds herself, somewhere in the Lyra neighborhood, at an illusionary tropical paradise of white sand and blue sky and crystal water. There she converses with a creature in the physical form of her beloved father. But the beatific David Morse is portrayed as such a kindly, glowing figure, it is almost as if Ellie is looking into the face of God.

Yea, verily I say unto you, that seems to be what Zemeckis and his writers are implying: A close encounter of the transformative, divine kind has been visited upon our heroine. And when the skeptics back home in the U.S. accuse her of perpetrating a hoax, her beefcake evangelist boyfriend is right there

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to back her up. "I, for one, believe her," he proclaims to the press.

As for Ellie, she defends herself by advising Congress that some things just have to be taken on faith.

So much for the scientific method!

The compromising of Sagan's female hero, the total Americanization of his global approach to interplanetary encounter, and the overly sentimental, *Touched by an Angel* overtones superimposed on his story to make it more uplifting and less controversial to America's moviegoing masses, annoyed me no end. But I'd rather watch a wrongheaded attempt to make an intelligent movie than a finely crafted example of utterly idiotic trash, any day.

And so would a lot of other people. Watching *Contact* was fun, but it was equally enjoyable to stop in at some of the film newsgroups in the weeks following the movie's release and read the ongoing debates. Some were about unimportant details like the use of rotary phones at the Arecibo bungalows. But many were about important issues relating to astrophysics, space politics, and spirituality.

It seems like a long time since a Hollywood science fiction film actually set people to thinking. It makes for a pleasant change. And if it turns into a trend, no one will be happier than I.

At the very least, the movie *Contact* may motivate a few more people to pick up the books of the late Carl Sagan. If it does, then the filmmakers will have accomplished something truly worthwhile.

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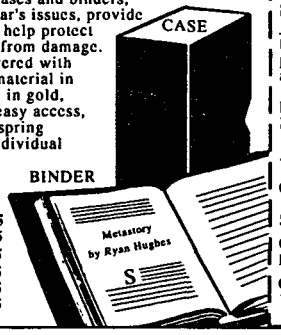

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Steven Boyett is the author of the novels Ariel *and* The Architect of Sleep, *as well as a handful of stories that have usually been classified as horror, such as "The Answer Tree" and "Emerald City Blues." In this new story he offers up an odd melange of different cultures, each of which makes as much sense as the other, and all of which eventually meet on the California coastline.*

Current Affairs

By Steven R. Boyett

FOUR TIBETAN MONKS work patiently around an ornate circle of colored sand they are gradually forming on an elevated platform in the Los Angeles Natural History Museum. They are small men, and though they are not young there is something youthful about their faces. Each of them looks as if he's remembering the punch line to a joke he heard earlier in the day, a very funny joke.

It would be hard to guess how old the monks are. Three of them have close-cropped black hair. The fourth is totally bald, not even any eyebrows, and has ears like the handle of a jug.

In their bright orange robes the monks meticulously sift tiny amounts of fine-crushed limestone onto the platform, then mold and paint it into patterns on an intricate circle seven feet wide. They are creating a mandala, a patterned, circular symbol that represents the wholeness of nature and the universe. When it is finished, this mandala will represent the *Kalachakra* —the Wheel of Time.

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There's a crowd of onlookers behind a low barricade here in the Mammal Hall of the museum. The Kalachakra demonstration was delayed a week because of a mild earthquake centered in Sylmar that caused minor damage even to stilt houses high up in the Hollywood Hills. But now the museum has been inspected and declared safe, and the monks and their ceremony have been the Thing to See this month.

The monks don't ignore the crowd; instead, they seem to regard it as part of their work, stopping every once in a while to point at someone and nod and grin and point at the illuminations and fine-lined designs and whorls taking shape on the platform.

For its part, the crowd finds the monks themselves as fascinating as the mandala. The small Tibetan men seem to take great delight in their work. Though precise and particular, they smile constantly, and even when they don't they look like children acting serious in the midst of some joyous game.

A museum guide standing beside the platform tells the crowd that these monks, who are from the Dalai Lama's Namgyai Monastery in India, are beginning a demonstration of a 2,500-year-old religious ceremony of spiritual empowerment and tranquility said to have been originated by Buddha himself in 600 B.C.

"Every morning," he tells the spectators, "these men start work on the Kalachakra by saying a prayer of purification to the spirits they believe live inside the mandala. They believe that these deities are constantly beckoning them to finish it."

Orange robes rustle, colored sand sifts.

Tibet, the guide says, is now a part of China, and the monks are forbidden to practice this ceremony in the country of their birth. They're touring the United States to demonstrate their beloved ritual and show what their art is like, and to provide unfamiliar Westerners with a sense of their philosophy and how they apply it through their daily lives.

A man wearing shorts and thongs and a Cartier watch asks how long will it take to finish the whatchamacallit, the Wheel?

"Six weeks," says the guide.

The crowd murmurs. That's a lot of work.

"What will they do with it when they're done?" a woman asks. "It looks like it's going to be beautiful when it's finished. Will it go into the museum?"

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The guide smiles. "No, ma'am. It'll go into the ocean." He even blushes a little as he points to four small whiskbrooms waiting in one corner of the platform. "They keep those here as a reminder."

The woman looks perplexed. "You mean they...?" And suddenly horrified. "How awful!" she says.

There's a kind of nervous, disbelieving laughter.

The smiling monks sift the fine-grained limestone, shape it, paint it.

Suddenly one of the monks, the jug-eared one, covers his mouth and nose — and turns away from the mandala to sneeze violently: Ba-shooo!

He vigorously wipes his palms on his bright robe and turns back to the delicate sand painting. He's grinning sheepishly as he sniffs and picks up another handful of colored crushed limestone. But he cannot resume his work because the other monks are laughing, laughing just as hard as they can.

The Creature from the Black Lagoon is liberating lobsters on the ocean floor. A grand gesture, a political action, really. Shame he can't just shred their trap and watch them flee, but to be their champion he has to pull them out one at a time and push them away. They drift downward, legs scrabbling nothing until they hit bottom.

Half the time they pinch hell out of him. Ingrates. He ought to let them stay in their trap; they're really too stupid to be useful as anything but food. But the Creature figures it's the principle of the thing.

The lobster trap is set upon a large concrete container. Inside the container is illegally dumped toxic waste. The Creature knows where there are many more just like it — there are a lot of them up and down the coastline, containing toxic waste, petroleum by-products from offshore drilling, military and industrial garbage, munitions, medical refuse, radioactive materials, you name it. There are also tremendous dump fields of slowly corroding metal drums containing toxins, contaminants, pesticides, radioactive garbage. Government and private industry understand the enormous potential of the ocean as a garbage can for things that can't be recycled or sold to the Third World. To the Creature, though, the containers are simply convenient landmarks, as they are for the lobster trappers who wonder what's inside them, but never bother to report their existence.

The Creature looks up at a splash from on high. He feels it more than hears it. Wonders who just dropped in.

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A repatriated lobster clamps onto the Creature's finger. He shakes it loose and jumps up. Tall buildings in a single bound? That's nothing down here.

Deirdre Mulligan descends the dune fandango. Her notes and spec reports are stained by her sweaty hand; a pen is mounted above her ear like a Sidewinder missile in a Huey gunship. She's dressed in worn jeans, a sleeveless T-shirt, and black L.A. Gear sneakers with fluorescent yellow laces. Her exposed skin is slathered with the strongest possible sunblock.

She stops near the beach and surveys the area. The sand is flat and shines like slate. Gradient gray in the air, but it's overcast, not smog. She hopes, anyway. Gulls grate overhead. The waves are powerful tall and loud. Two boys in bright Body Glove bathing suits paddle surfboards out among the troughs. Normally they'd be wearing wetsuits, but this season the water's ten degrees warmer than usual. No one knows why. It's caused some pretty exotic finds, such as South American Humboldt squid and the *Tamaria obstipa*, a starfish native to coastal waters off Peru. An influx of South American creatures, muses Deirdre. Maybe they brought the weather with 'em. Whatever, the Environmental Impact Report she's supervising will have to take this into account.

Laguna Negra Beach is simply beautiful. The place seems somehow primal, ancient and still forming. The beach is smooth and dun, the sand fine and hard-packed. The south end of the crescent that is Laguna Negra is formed by the raw rock of the San Onofre mountain range meeting the waves. The surf here is usually mild — but the surfers like it because the waves break obliquely across half the bay. The obstruction of mountain into breaking waves, however, makes it one of the few points in Southern California where water intermittently slams rock to make huge sprays. To the north is a large wooden pier, the only manmade structure that really intrudes on the beach or into the bay.

Standing here, amid the booming surf and the unlittered sand and the spray jetting from the clash of water and rock to the misted south, Deirdre can easily imagine some old, ungainly, top-heavy, square-rigged ship tacking up the coast, for this is one of the few such areas in this region that seem untouched by time.

From a real-estate broker's point of view, this place is Nirvana.

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Shit.

Deirdre Mulligan belongs to a fairly rare species: *Californium indigenous*, the native Californian. She was born in Northridge when there were still orange groves there, and educated in several schools as her father, an assistant principal, kept getting transferred in accordance with the lifestyle decree that insists no Southern Californian can remain in one spot longer than three years. After satisfying her carefree adolescent desires for recreational pharmaceuticals (well, all right: after *whetting* them), Deirdre attended UC San Diego and walked away with a BS in Marine Biology. Then a year of post-grad at Scripps and a certificate in Environmental Sciences from Berkeley.

Deirdre could have kept collecting initials after her name, but that seemed too much like hiding to her. Instead she hired out to fledgling environmental watchdog groups for a pittance, limped along on public funding and the occasional government grant, and in general tried to stick by her private agenda. An agenda not for herself but for the world. Despite a wealth of training and scientific terminology at her command, Deirdre's desires could be expressed in simple colors: make the land green again, the oceans blue, the skies clear.

Times were tough for idealistic but practical environmental activists. Openings in Deirdre's field were plentiful — if you wanted to tell multinational conglomerates where to dump their toxic waste, how to store processed uranium, how to present development proposals so that it won't look like a thousand acres of arable land weren't being forevermore eradicated. Indications were that someone was about to renege on that nifty-cool and sparkling 21st-Century Techno-Eden Deirdre was promised as she rode the slidewalks through Disneyland.

Her job at Eco/Logic, Inc., is her compromise. There she can conduct honest Environmental Impact Reports, and half the time she can restrict developers who don't have the environment's best interests at heart when they set to pillaging. *Stopping* development is an absurd notion, of course. But at least Deirdre gets to make sure that what gets built doesn't mess anything up (too badly, at least), and what will, doesn't get built.

Deirdre's calves tighten as her feet push into the softer sand above the tide line. It feels like those dreams where you try to run and don't get anywhere. She has the beach to herself this fine late-summer afternoon.

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Funny how people flock away from the beach toward sundown. Dark is when she likes the beach best.

Seagrapes pop beneath the sole of one shoe. Deirdre thinks of the Portuguese man o' wars that ride the Gulfstream currents. Innocent little gasbag jellyfish; they look like little laundry bags. Once, on Florida's Gulf Coast, she had seen a barefoot boy stomp one, *pop*, before she could yell for him to stop. His foot had swelled to melon size within minutes. None of that here, she thinks. And if there was anything like that here — anything threatening, anything to reduce the comfort of this spot for human occupation — why, it'd just have to be removed, now wouldn't it. To make this Kodak Picture Spot more perfect, more natural.

On a trip to Disney World with Grant she had noticed those signs telling tourists where to take their pictures: *Kodak Picture Spot.* Grant had told her he imagined a guy with a big semi truck full of those signs, driving across the country looking for picturesque locales. "Grand Canyon?" Grant had said, and mimed hammering. "Wham-wham-wham. Kodak Picture Spot! Yellowstone National Park? Need a couple dozen trucks there. Wham wham wham!" And Deirdre had laughed at the image of a landscape crowded with vying signs, Kodak Picture Spot signs as far as the eye could see.

Only now it doesn't seem so funny.

Still....The proposed hundred-million-dollar Laguna Negra Resort will have to meet local, state, and federal clean-water, clean-air, and waste-dumping standards. Not only that, but before any development or construction can begin, it must also satisfy the California Environmental Quality Act — which means it can't impair its neighbors' view or appreciably lower adjoining property values. Land grading and drainage must be taken into account. And most important, the development and construction of the resort must in no way endanger any specialized or rare flora or fauna.

Deirdre looks out to the Pacific Ocean where the two boys in bright colors are mounting their surfboards to catch a wave. One boy wears lime green and black trunks, the other neon orange and black. They're having a great time eavesdropping on the eternal conversation between the ocean and the shore.

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Deirdre turns back to look at the beach, at the sand and acres of undeveloped land behind it. She sighs. *Undeveloped.* Like its potential is achingly unrealized. Bring us your yearning, your huddled parcels of land crying out for development.

From the north she hears a dull *pok! pok! pok!* The sound is flattened by the broad beach. Someone's putting the resort development sign back up.

If I could find one thing, she thinks. *One thing to keep them from ruining yet another stretch of beach forever.*

A line from an old song comes to her mind. Something about the sea raging like a man, and the land giving like a woman. She realizes that she *does* think of the developers as men, and the land as a woman.

She laughs humorlessly. But just because it's a terrible sexual metaphor doesn't make it any less true. Or terrible.

ELOISE POST FROWNS down at the scarred sign on the dune. Why, this is vandalism. Sheer wanton vandalism. Disrespectful children running around destroying property. Honestly, don't their parents teach them *anything*?

She squats to examine the sign. Someone really did a job on it. Looks like they beat it with a crowbar or a claw hammer or something. She's just going to have to put up a new one. Yep, I went to college so's I could swing a hammer. You bet.

She sighs, thinking about the remainder of her day. She knows she's mostly puttering around right now, wasting time, putting off having to go to Roger's to pick up Jennifer. The beach ought to provide a few hours of freedom from such thoughts, but it's hard for Eloise to allow herself emotional vacations, however brief. Especially since Laguna Negra Beach itself contains memories for her. Remembrances of her and Roger together in happier times.

Frowns come easily to Eloise's face, as if it had been made ready-to-frown, with prefolded lines at the corners of her mouth and eyes. How many times must you frown to wear a groove in something as soft and pliant as skin?

Eloise looks up from the ruined sign to see the water turning metal-bright in the lowing sun. A sun that *sets* on the beach is still a novelty to

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her. Studying her face, you wonder at the forces at work in her core that have revealed themselves on the surface, much like continents sliding through the millennia across the skin of the Earth that, with time and pressure, form mountain ridges and plains. What lies in the mantle beneath Eloise's young-old face to have caused such tectonic erosion? In the way that a geologist can look at a groove in the land and sense the passage of glaciers, we can look at the riverbed tridents at the corners of Eloise's eyes, the sinkhole depression of parentheses bracketing her mouth, and see the Ice Age that was her marriage, the chronic flooding of her Marketing Relations position, the greenhouse effect of her father's overbearing attention, the firmly buried fossil stratum of her mother's early death.

Eloise surveys the shore. Looks like the beach is mine, she thinks. She squints. No — somebody else down there, near the other side of the bay. Redheaded woman, looks like.

Eloise gets a brief, absurd image of herself in a cowboy outfit a'stridin' toward the stranger on the sand. *This beach ain't big enough for the two of us.* It shouldn't irritate her, but it does. If the shore were crowded it would be one thing, but to *almost* have it to yourself....

She sighs. Obviously nothing's going to satisfy her today.

She's thinking about the wreckage of her marriage as she turns back to the shredded resort sign. Pointless vandalism, she thinks again.

What's that, Weezy? whispers a part of her mind she'd pay dearly to have amputated. *Your marriage*?

Eloise's face gets all pinched-looking. "The *sign*," she says out loud, and then feels herself turning red. She glances around. No one to hear her.

You let a community know that someone's come along to beautify the area and up their real-estate values, she thinks, forcing her train of thought onto a different set of rails, and they bash your sign and file petitions to stop you. And the community happily signs the petitions because, after all, you are a *developer*.

The cries of gulls carry over the waves' crashing.

Eloise's position at Villa Nova Development is one of three in the Marketing Department. Basically, she makes development proposals look attractive and attends meetings and assuages homeowners and tries to argue politely and rationally with 150K young execs who think of

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themselves as environmentalists and have the L.L. Bean shirts and spotless Jeep Cherokees to prove it.

Now, Eloise is not naive. Villa Nova isn't developing from any altruistic desire for civic improvement. They want money, lots of it, and they spend a lot to make even more. But Eloise thinks of herself as a kind of lawyer: she's paid to go to bat for the people who are paying her. She doesn't have to believe in the company's aims, as long as she doesn't disbelieve them, and as long as she benefits from them. Like any good remora, Eloise is along for the ride.

Eloise looks at the papers in her hand: Villa Nova's resort proposal and Eco/Logic's prospectus describing the parameters and scope of the Environmental Impact Report.

The right to build Laguna Negra Resort is not at all established yet — in fact, a clear ownership of the real-estate parcel will not be official until that right is secured. It all hinges on the Environmental Impact Report and the county's approval of it.

Eloise kicks ineffectually at the vandalized resort sign. Here comes the Big Bad Developer.

One of Eloise's duties is to anticipate that EIR for which her company is paying a cool million, and prepare an assessment of her own that preempts it, and, if necessary, negates it. It helps that L.A. County allows developers to hire whoever the hell they want to conduct the EIR, and no law says that they can't hire someone else if they don't like the results. Technically the EIR is a public document, but when completed it will be sent to the lawyer who negotiated the deal between Eco/Logic and Villa Nova, so that it's protected as a privileged lawyer-client communication.

She begins trudging inland. Got to get a new sign out of the car and drag it back here. Won't that be fun?

Recent environmental legislation has made the issue of coastal development quite a hot potato, one that gets tossed from committee to committee until it's hard to figure where it will land. And the California Coastal Commission may sound like an important body of experts with large important offices in large important government buildings, but basically it's a dozen overworked, underpaid people in an office without air conditioning in Sacramento, including exactly one field manager for the entire Southland.

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As she fishes her car keys from her purse (carrying a purse on the beach! in tennis shoes and a dress! in this heat!), Eloise thinks of ways to work this situation in her favor — fully aware that everyone else involved can, too.

It's frustrating enough to make King Solomon take up finger-painting, and complicated enough to make you wonder that anything ever gets built at all.

But things do. Time after time after time.

THE CREATURE HEADS toward shore toting a heavy metal drum on his plated back. It's the drum that made the splash that distracted him while he was liberating the lobsters. Not a diver, just another boat using his living room for a garbage can.

If the Creature hadn't been environmentally sensitive because of his (admittedly small) act of rebellion, he might have been inclined to let this invasion slide. But that drum had come barreling down the water to land smack on top of a lobster the Creature had freed not three minutes before. It smashed the lobster flatter than a leper joke and twice as tasteless. It kicked up a smoky cloud of bottom mud like a detonating depth charge, and when it settled the Creature could see the paint-stenciled letters on the side of the drum. HAZARDOUS MATERIALS, it read.

The Creature got hopping mad. On the outside, hopping mad for the Creature is pretty mild: he folded his scaled arms and opened his mouth to feel the pulse of the current, and he just stood there, letting lobsters scurry away, ignoring the few that remained in the trap. But inside the Creature was a slow burn. It was your basic core meltdown, where the outside looks fine while the inside collapses and heats up, and nothing shows on the outside until the inside explodes past it.

The Creature looks at that HAZARDOUS MATERIALS stencil, and he wonders how many drumfuls of hazardous materials you have to have before you need a stencil to label them all. A lot, he figures. Twenty or thirty, maybe as much as a hundred.

The Creature doesn't like this.

Which is why he's toting that drum back toward shore with the intent to leave it in plain sight for someone to find and properly dispose

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of on land. If these are their HAZARDOUS MATERIALS, then they should keep them.

He leaves the drum in the shallows forty or fifty feet offshore, figuring to let the tide do the rest of the work. The drum will be a lot heavier out of the water, and the Creature just doesn't feel like lugging it around. Besides which, these days he's trying to keep his shoreline appearances to a minimum, and then only at night. It's starting to get a bit too crowded around here for his taste. He's cut the sensitive soles of his otherwise armored feet on more broken glass and can lids than he can remember; motorboat drones keep him awake in the grotto (which he tries to sleep in by day, good goddamn luck); and he's been hit in the head by surfboards not once, not twice, but *three* times.

The Creature doesn't like the thought of leaving, though. The grotto is nice, and he's invested a lot of time turning it into a place he likes spending time in. Like most of us, the Creature wants little more than to lead his life undisturbed, to keep his head above water, so to speak.

He kicks off from the drum and swims shoreward to take a quick look at likely places for the drum to appear.

The Creature surfaces. Immediately he feels the sun pressing down on him like a hot fabric. Yowza. His scaly plated skin begins to tighten like drying leather — which, in a way, it is. His vision blurs as his eyes dehydrate. He slaps water into them and gazes toward shore.

Pok! pok! pok!

The Creature has no eyelids, and he hates noises that make him want to blink.

Pok! pok! pok!

You just don't know how much Eloise hates this. Pounding signs into the sand is hardly in her job description. One of the Mexicans hired by Villa Nova should be out here in his pickup truck to take care of this sort of thing. But Smith Webber asked her to do it as long as she was out here, "to keep our presence felt and keep our name in front of those people."

Eloise swings the hammer again, *pok!* She hates that sound. It makes her blink. Every time she strikes, she tries to will her eyes from blinking.

At her feet are the Resort Proposal and Eco/Logic's EIR prospectus.

Pok! Eloise blinks. It becomes a matter of proving her will not to blink.

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She's probably going to pull a triceps muscle. Eloise is secretly proud to know the names of muscles. She learned them in aerobics classes, which she took up in order to regain her slim figure after Jennifer was born. *Pok!* She'd wanted to look appealing again for Roger. Fat lot of good that had done her. *Pok!* Get it? *Fat* lot of good....

Oh, never mind.

Eloise is thinking about how to take the wind out of Eco/Logic's sails should the EIR turn out unfavorable —

— when a shadow falls across her newly erected sign.

The Creature looks from the running woman to the papers lying beside the mallet she dropped on the sand. A spiral-bound report and a stapled sheaf of paper. He bends to pick them up. Yow: bad backs run in his family. Too much time on land causes curvature of the spine.

Across the top margin of the notepad is scribbled, *Laguna Negra — Prelim Assmnt Notes.* Wonder what that could mean? The page is filled with hard-to-read scrawls. The Creature tries to puzzle them out, but it's no use. He's been out of the water way too long and his vision's blurry. It'll be nice to have something to read back at the grotto, though; that Jackie Collins novel — while really good — was getting kind of moldy.

Really, though, the ooga booga had been foolish this time out. Whatever that human woman had been, she was no unsuspecting beach type. She was costumed differently, and was obviously perturbed about the sign he'd destroyed in a fit of pique, because she'd been putting up a new one.

And suddenly the Creature wants to know what this writing in his hand is all about.

He's lost in thought, trying to come up with a way to get these papers back to the grotto —

— when a shadow falls across the page.

Deirdre Mulligan stares in stunned wonder across the corrugated ocean. Lowing sunlight sparks diamond from wave caps.

She has just seen a rare and amazing thing. Deirdre Mulligan quivers exalted, sublime, like an Old Testament citizen sharing a drink at a well with an angel. Privileged. She feels an astonishing calm inside.

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It hadn't frightened her. Oh, her heart is yammering, her hands are shaking; she feels the kind of apprehensive thrill Pasteur must have felt when he held up the petri dish and saw that the bread mold had vanquished the disease. But she is not frightened.

The Scientist part of her mind objects. *Hoax!* it cries. *Piltdown Man! Hollywood monster movie, decorated diving suit, publicity stunt mirage mass hysteria sunspots!*

And as a scientist she responds: the thing had had unseamed joints; she could see the skeletal motion of ball-in-socket and hinge joints at knee and elbow, see the supportive understructure of ribs, metacarpals, metatarsals, phalanges. And the unidirectional flanging of the gills and cup-shaped spread of hands, the elongated and widened feet, the delta-gouge of mouth in a head designed to pivot up and lead the rest of the body — all spoke of a design evolved for horizontal travel underwater. The skin was *skin*, not latex: textured, iridescent from secretions, patched with algae, draped with seagrape, scaled and plated, flexible and contouring.

Whatever it was, it wasn't a guy in a costume. It had moved too fluidly, too naturally — though not very quickly. It looked too *real.*

And it had gone into the water, and not come back up.

No, it was real, a real, living creature.

But — what *was* it? Where had it come from? Why had it left no evolutionary record?

"It lives in the water, stupid," Deirdre says aloud. Ahh. And how much of that fossil record has been played on the turntable of Science?

Top Forty only.

And what if its bones aren't bones at all, but cartilage? Rapid decomposition, no fossilization. *Cartilage delende est.*

In the same way a comparative morphologist, a zoologist — any member of a score of sciences — can look at a seal and see a dog that fetched an evolutionary stick fifty million years ago on the Darwinian shore and never returned, can see the horse in the hippo, the elephant in the manatee, the monkey in the man — in that way, Deirdre looked at the creature and saw a human being that had changed its naturally selective mind however many million years ago and returned to the protean aquatic womb.

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A dolphin is a distant cousin. *This* is a brother.

And it's living off her beach.

She's standing in calf-high water with her jeans rolled past her knees. The unusually warm water feels good against her legs. Looking down at the foam sliding past, Deirdre has the sensation that she is moving and the water is stationary — a feeling she remembers from being on the beach as a child. Funny how a sensation, an aroma, a quick play of light, can be a pipeline back to childhood, how all of it can rush back right there in front of you as if no time has passed.

And suddenly inside her is a deep rushing echo of that outer sensation. She looks out to sea again, at an imagined place where her creature (*her* creature!) swims unseen. And realizes she's found her EIR's ace in the hole.

Deirdre hoots. Deirdre hollers. She kicks a spray of salt water and digs a trough in the malleable wet sand.

Something exposed there gleams green. Some kind of stone? Deirdre bends, touches its smooth surface. Surf rolls round her legs. She hooks fingers beneath the object and pries it loose, swirls it in the water to wash away the sand. Holds it up to the sun.

It's the most amazing color green. Not jade, not emerald. Its edges are rounded and polished by the lapidary ocean. It is, she realizes, a fragment of a soft-drink bottle. For years it has been softened and burnished by the tides and the sand, until the ocean has turned it into something neither glass nor stone nor jewel. There's a name for it, what is it...?

Driftglass.

She looks out to sea. And looks at the ethereal green lozenge in her hand.

All right, Deirdre-m'darlin'. Let's say you turn in an EIR that says you can't build a mammoth resort because there's a *bona fide* green gill man living off Laguna Negra beach. And let's say you can prove it before they lock you somewhere that doesn't have any edges. What then? No resort, no siree. And maybe Mr. Gills ends up on some laboratory's meat slicer. Or on Leno. Which amounts to the same thing.

"Aw...." She can't think of an expletive that quite describes her feelings.

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She's still turning the glass about in her hands, watching the play of gold California sunlight across its slick surface, when a commotion behind her makes her turn.

Four Tibetan monks in orange robes are walking toward the water. One of them carries a glass vase filled with colored sands. They are grinning at the ocean like kids contemplating some really great prank. Behind them is a crowd of spectators and news reporters.

For a moment Deirdre thinks the newspeople are there because of the Creature; they've already been notified and Deirdre's precious knowledge of the Creature's existence is achingly over. Then she sees the Buddhist monks and thinks that, no, the Creature wasn't a creature at all but a fake, some kind of PR deal, a movie promo, and here's the rest of it.

Then she watches the monks themselves.

The wind whips at their orange robes as they stride without hesitation into the water, unmindful of the cold and not bothering to hitch up their hems. The one holding the vase raises it high, and cameras begin to click. The monks start chanting prayers.

They are perhaps twenty feet away from Deirdre now.

They pray, smiling throughout, then bow — to the vase, to the ocean, to one another. The one holding the vase is completely bald, not even any eyebrows, and his ears stick out like jug handles. Happily he lowers the vase, and the other three monks laugh and say "*Ahh!*" when he upends it and scatters multicolored sand into the ocean.

Some in the crowd applaud. Some seem startled. The monks pay no heed. They gleefully bend to the water and begin sloshing it everywhere, laughing as they mix the sand with the seawater, splashing each other and talking a mile a minute in their singsong language.

Then they bow to one another again, and to the ocean, and turn away.

One of them, the bald one with the jug-handle ears, sees Deirdre staring in startled wonder there in the water. He looks at the gleaming green thing in her hand, and he grins and nods as if he knows what it is, and even as if he knows what it means to her. He bows to Deirdre, nothing solemn about it at all, and Deirdre finds herself bowing back.

And then they are gone, clapping each other on the back, kicking back little trails of sand from their sandals, bright orange robes flapping like sails, and the crowd leaves with them.

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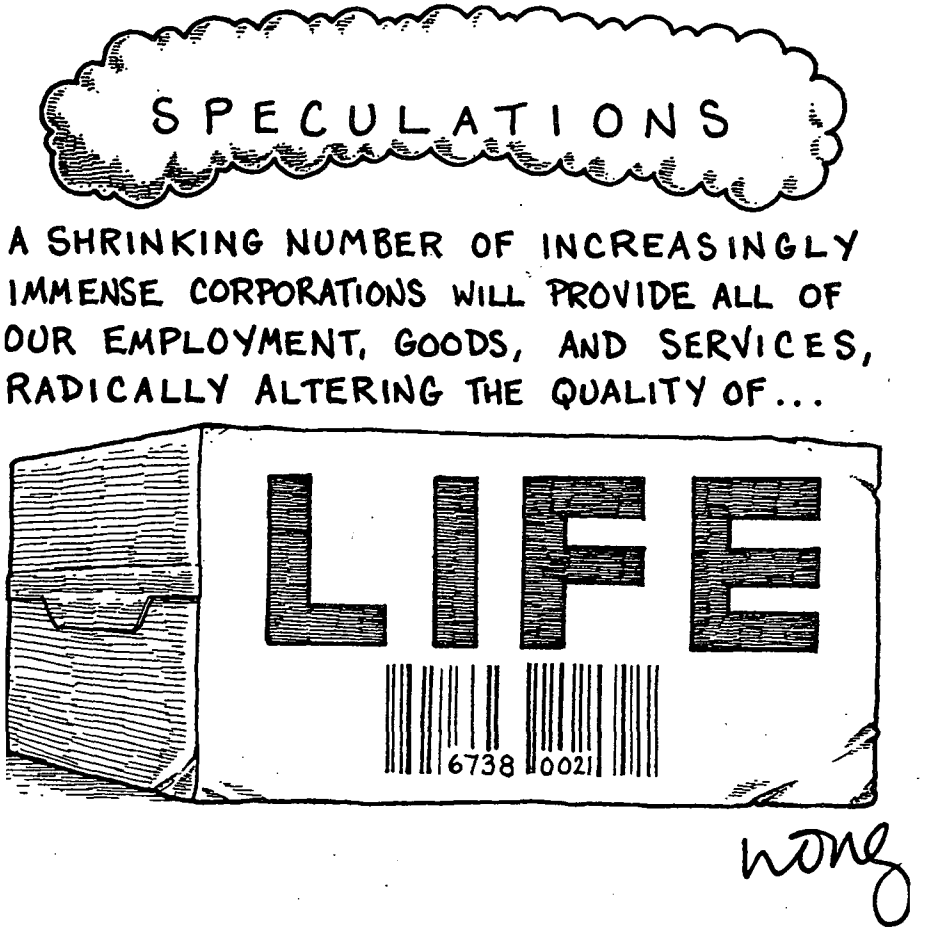
Deirdre looks at the water where they scattered the colored sand. It has blended in; there's no sign it was ever there at all. Just grayish green, the way the water always looks.

She looks at the driftglass in her hand. Suddenly happy and sad at the same time, she brings her arm back and throws it, throws it just as far as she can.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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

OUR COMPLEX GREENHOUSE

FORTY YEARS ago, noted oceanographer Roger Revelle declared that "human beings are now carrying out a large-scale geophysical experiment" — yearly pumping billions of tons of carbon dioxide into the air. We have taken this long to get serious about the issue of inadvertently "geoengineering" our planet by altering atmospheric chemistry.

No issue holds more profound possible consequences for the next century. Yet so far the debate and hand-wringing have been both angry and unimaginative. This is the first of two columns that will look at the greenhouse problem and possible fixes, including some quite imaginative ones.

There may very well be fairly simple ways, and even easy, inexpensive ones, to fix our growing dilemma — but the tone of discussion never makes this clear. Most proposed solutions are a funhouse mirror, telling us more about our moral postures than about our complex world. Debate swirls over evidence, transfixed by details, largely ignoring the horizons.

Some physical facts are incontrovertible: Carbon dioxide (CO_2) levels have risen 30 percent since the industrial revolution and the planet has warmed about half a degree Centigrade in the last century.

Tiny air bubbles trapped in glacial ice show that past climate variations closely followed CO_2 levels, now at the highest level in 200,000 years. They also reveal that sudden shifts like the last century's have been rare, appearing only once or twice a millennium.

Spring arrives about a week early now in the arctic tundra. In Antarctica, spring flowers enjoy a

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growing season two weeks longer than twenty-five years ago. Ice shelves retreat near the poles. Marine fauna near the shores are extending their range to higher latitudes. Similar plant growth patterns imply, but do not prove, global warming.

Still, students of the atmosphere nearly unanimously agree that global warming lies behind a rapidly growing body of suggestive evidence. Earth's greenhouse retains the sun's heat, delivered by visible light, because certain gases trap low-frequency heat radiation, not allowing it to escape to space.

Carbon dioxide and several other gases are very efficient at trapping heat radiation. Indeed, the chlorine compounds which damage our ozone layer are incredibly good greenhouse gases. If they had not been curtailed starting in the 1980s, by 2000 they would have accounted for the majority of all the greenhouse effect.

I find the evidence of this global trend convincing, and shall assume so here, though there are doubters.

Climate changes are humbling, reflecting how poorly we understand the entire planetary thermostat. Some blunt facts are clear: from the sun comes 340 Watts per square meter (W/m^2), striking the top of our atmosphere. About 100 W/m^2 gets reflected, with 80 W/m^2 absorbed within the atmosphere and 160 more absorbed by seas and land. Some of this energy returns to space, carried by invisible heat radiation, the infrared. Water vapor absorbs some, rises, and creates weather.

This principle seems clear enough, but then complications stack to the sky. Water clouds both reflect sunlight and absorb infrared — just how much depends on how thick they are and on the height of their tops. Natural water vapor may be the most important greenhouse gas, but we aren't even sure of that. Hopes that warming will give us cloudier days, reflecting more sunlight, may prove true — but are controversial.

Pollution clouds of sulfate particles over cities do reflect sunlight, and so have partially offset the usual greenhouse effect of burning the fossil fuels that made the impurities in the first place.

The first effect of reducing emissions will be to lose that reflecting layer, contributing further to warming. Climate study is a blizzard of such details; every coin has two faces.

Just how complex the air-ocean-land structure may be is itself

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controversial. At the extreme lies the Gaia hypothesis, which envisions a self-organizing and regulating entity that has adjusted over billions of years to keep Earth's biosphere vital in the face of astronomy's blunt forces and steadily building irritants, such as salinity in seawater. Most biologists and geologists reject Gaia but concede that we only dimly perceive how the system works. Variations may be sensitive to seemingly minor effects.

For example, in the early 1990s a good-news discovery showed that atmospheric methane concentrations have stopped rising. This cheered many, since methane is a potent greenhouse gas. There are myriad sources of this gas, which accounts for a quarter as much warming as CO_2. Presumably it comes from leaky Russian pipelines, termite digestion, rice paddies, cow flatulence, swamp gas, and the like. Yet there have been parallel drops in CO_2, while oxygen content jumped. How this fits with the methane plateau remains mysterious, especially since the latest data shows levels resuming their rise again.

No climate modeler pretends to a detailed, quantitative understanding of what's going on. Yet we may be rushing toward an era when ignorance will not serve as an excuse not to act.

Greenhouse Gassing

Mounting evidence led the U.S. to sign the Rio Earth Summit pact in 1992, promising skeptics to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels — by 2000, honest. All this they would do by relying on voluntary measures — honest.

But by mid-1997 the State Department owned up that we are now 8 percent over 1990 levels and would miss the target big time, venting 13 percent more than in 1990 — and some watchdog groups think that's an underestimate. Meanwhile, scientists' estimate of the correct target to avoid big warming effects is about 40 percent less.

Economists, not fond of making moral judgments, blame our burgeoning economy. At the State Department there is talk of asking to push the date back to 2010, when better technology might make a difference — honest. They have heeded some startling estimates that the industrial cost to drop U.S. CO_2 emissions by 20 percent could be several trillion dollars. As usual, there are economists who differ enormously about this, leaving the layman scratching his head.

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Certainly the easiest technical way to curtail CO_2 lies in automobile fuel economy. Congress has ducked this path, ever since it trampled Clinton's 1993 energy tax ideas.

We are the big bad boy of global warming, 4 percent of the world's people using a quarter of the fossil fuels, but with plenty of company; most of the advanced nations will fail to reach their goals, too. There is plenty of blame to go around.

Planners propose several mechanisms to help comply with the Rio goals, such as carbon taxes and trading of emission credits. In 1997 nearly 2,000 U.S. economists signed a statement arguing that the benefits of acting outweighed the costs, envisioning principally cleaner fuels, cars, and technologies. They advocate "recycling" proceeds from a carbon tax into lower payroll and corporate taxes, to stimulate new investment.

Still, years of negotiation have failed to make any headway on these measures.

To answer a rising howl of international complaint, the U.S. proposed in 1997 a foreign aid program to end tree-cutting and burning policies in the developing nations, plus some technical aid. Catcalls greeted this proposal; speaking at the U.N., Clinton avoided setting a new conservation target and said nothing that would provoke domestic consumers.

To be sure, the prosperous states have plenty of promising and nearly painless new ways to cut back: high efficiency refrigerators and lighting, ozone laundering, microwave drying, variable-speed motors. The micro-level tinkerers have no end of tricks. But so far even humdrum methods like better insulation, smaller cars, wind, and solar sources remain under-used.

The 600-pound gorilla in global warming is the rise in fuel burning in the developing nations. The generally reliable International Energy Agency projects that 85 percent of rising CO_2 emissions will come from developing regions and Eastern Europe, societies with little appetite for conservation.

China and Russia have immense reserves of coal, the worst polluter fuel, and are moving to exploit them further. They have customers already standing in line. China is already the second biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, and is quickly gaining on the U.S.

New factors threaten, as well. Recently oceanographers have found a potential new fossil fuel source: methane hydrates, con-

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densed natural gas trapped in crystalline cages of frozen water molecules. Seabed prospecting has found vast reserves on the continental shelf, reachable by many nations. Estimates say that methane hydrates hold double the combined reserves in oil, coal, and ordinary natural gas.

Even Draconian restrictions by the fossil fuel exporters — a fantasy itself, I think — could simply stimulate hydrate use. Fossil fuels are simply too plentiful to regulate globally.

Optimists on Call

Early in the greenhouse debate, some people saw more good than harm. Could more CO_2 and warming help? After all, that's how nature took us out of the glacial age, propelling Cro-Magnon toward his current undreamed plenty.

Slight warming does indeed prod trees and crops to higher yields. This could help feed the coming population doubling that some foresee within the next fifty to seventy-five years. But studies of the last century's warming effects on northern trees shows a plateau effect, beyond a mild heating boundary already crossed.

With good use of added fertilizer, farmers might get a rise in yield, but perhaps for only a few decades before the effect ends or even reverses. Crops show some vulnerability to high temperatures, as well, especially without lots of added water.

In the early 1980s the energy companies launched a tobacco-industry style disinformation campaign against the global warming findings. Some scientists cast a skeptical eye at the data, while others were professional optimists. Predictably, the effort to "reposition global warming as theory rather than fact" (as one fossil fuel lobby memo put it) spurred each side to higher ramparts of rhetoric.

Most media are vulnerable to the binary model of disagreement, so that the skeptic position on warming gets equal exposure, despite being held by a tiny minority of the scientists working in the area. This does not mean they are wrong, but it does reveal a sobering truth: a small propaganda investment by the oil and coal lobby has bought them decades of delay.

"We have no spare decades left," Bill McKibben (*The End of Nature*) declares, as economists agree that the U.S. shift from heavy industry to a service economy spawned few cuts in consumption.

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In fact, demand for the highest quality energy, electrical, swells as phone lines and computers proliferate. And economist Arthur Rypinski of the Department of Energy notes that "even in the information age it gets cold in the winter and hot in the summer."

Bad effects appear far more probable in the long run. Pumping more energy into the weather system will alter patterns, perhaps violently. Weather changes could give us crop-blighting droughts in Kansas, dustbowls in Asia, brutal hurricanes. Water expands when warmed, so sea levels could rise a foot or two, inundating farmland and many cities.

Oil companies aren't the only mega-businesses concerned with warming. Six of the ten most costly natural disasters in the U.S. occurred in 1986-96, bringing some insurance companies teetering toward insolvency. They have backed studies to see if warming is the culprit.

Also, the Alliance of Small Island States has lobbied for the advanced nations to reduce their greenhouse emissions 20 percent below 1990 levels. They fear flooding within mere decades, erasing whole island countries.

Biologists, already wringing their hands over many shifts in plant growth that may signal global warming, need only look a bit downstream to see possible synergistic effects. Insects may migrate into higher latitudes, bringing tropical diseases to a new audience. Public health spending is an even touchier subject than insurance.

Stewards of the Earth

Some climate scientists worry that we may be approaching a chaos boundary, invoking ideas from current nonlinear systems theory. If so, the world could lurch suddenly into a dynamic equilibrium differing from the mild conditions civilization has enjoyed since the last glacial era, more than ten thousand years ago. Geological evidence shows that over the last 70,000 years the planet has snapped into severely different temperature regimes, for reasons only vaguely fathomed.

Some scientists have already worked out possible dramatic shifts. A recent study showed that some northern forests were withering under a two-degree Centigrade local increase over the last century. Slight warming, good; more, bad.

Following this trend further, if high-latitude tundra melts, it could release stored methane, which is

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twenty times more effective at greenhousing than CO_2. Such a triggered shift at the poles could rearrange our global weather, damaging crops. Melting of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet could raise the sea level several meters within a few years.

Should we worry? Chaos theory itself is more than a bit precarious. This young discipline applies to systems with few active degrees of freedom. So heavily constrained, they act effectively as if they resembled simple one- or two-dimensional dynamical systems, such as a pendulum that has a large arc.

Are such rarefied studies useful for the greenhouse? Quite possibly not: Climate has at least several major active factors — air, sea, and land, plus the sun, and doubtless other variables only vaguely glimpsed. With many degrees of freedom, one needs complexity theory — chaos theory for grownups. Alas, we know little of that currently hot area.

So in this crisis we are stuck with inadequate theoretical tools. The history of science shows that good advice in such situations is to stick close to the phenomena, relying on small, weak experiments, well tracked by computer simulations and an army of thinkers. This the advanced nations are doing, and being rather quiet about it. But they may not have long to labor.

Below the rarefied realms of theory, in the muddy media battleground, the hired optimists are losing the propaganda battle to the doomsayers. Disaster is more thrilling, makes for better graphics, and there are many varieties from which to choose.

Noted climate authority James McCarthy of Harvard observed, "If the last 150 years had been marked by the kind of climate instability we are now seeing, the world would never have been able to support its present population of 5 billion people."

Economists tend to forget that the global industrial engine depends on the global environment, not the other way around. What happens when the business community starts projecting climate shifts in its plans? Alarm could spread, provoking corporate pressure to do something. But what?

"The only way to slow climate change is to use less fuel," McKibben asserts, echoing the universal environmentalist position. Indeed, ecologists and many other scientists champion extreme conservation measures as the only solution. Both scientists and environmentalists

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have long histories of distrusting the unruly market and the vagaries of diplomacy.

Ross Gelbspan's *The Heat Is On* even urges a public takeover of the energy sector and a massive propaganda campaign. Expect to see such calls for a Greenhouse Czar as the problem worsens and rises to broad, persistent public notice.

In his last book, *Billions and Billions*, Carl Sagan stated flatly, "The world must cut its dependence on fossil fuels by more than half." In context he was envisioning Draconian police measures and a sweeping indoctrination campaign.

Those pushing better technology and solar energy, such as Michael Oppenheimer of the Environmental Defense Fund, do sometimes believe that goals "would be better achieved using incentives and disincentives than technology mandates and confiscation."

Still, they all see no way out but the Puritan Program: abstain, sinner!

Politics and Parasols

A little-noticed 1992 National Academy of Sciences panel report clarified the muddy science behind global warming and then ventured further. Could we intervene to offset the warming? Accept that greenhouse gases will rise and find ways to compensate for them?

Climate modification is time-honored, though not clearly a winner. Cloud seeding in the U.S. during the 1940s and '50s met some success, but ended in a blizzard of lawsuits from those who claimed their local rainfall had been co-opted by neighboring areas. Though such assertions had little scientific proof, courts felt otherwise.

During the Cold War both sides studied a menu of climatic dirty tricks. Plans to drop dark dust on polar snows envisioned diversion or formation of rivers. Think-tanks contemplated how to bring crop-killing changes to opponents. Increasing cloud cover to put a parasol over an opponents' cropland just before prime harvest could distort economies. Apparently none got carried out, though there were lesser biological warfare measures aimed at Cuba's agriculture.

These programs floundered on a fundamental fact: Before modifying climate, one must first grasp it. At the level of understanding of even the 1960s, only spectacular interventions would have left discernible signatures. Climate variability was so little fathomed that

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weather prediction was pointless beyond roughly a week.

Since then, in an advance little-noticed by the public, systematic weather prediction has improved more than ten-fold in assured time range. By watching the sun, atmosphere, ocean, land, and clouds using satellites, advanced aircraft, ships, and a tightly gridded land-observing system, we have diminished the classic uncertainties in the long-range weather.

As Mark Twain pointed out, we are still just talking about the weather, but at least the talk is of higher quality and we can see a bit downstream.

In 1997 the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency predicted a coming wet winter half a year in advance, based on temperature measurements of tropical waters, presaging a new El Niño.

Right or wrong — and I'll bet they prove right — this signals a new era in forecasting. With the latest systems, backed by heavy computer modeling, we shall with rising assurance shrink uncertainties, identify subtle feedback loops, sniff out regional pollution patterns, discern the spread of deserts and the withering of forests.

Sensitive global measures of disturbance shall open more to us: polar and glacial contractions, ozone levels, volcanic dust, levels of the oceans. There is even a technique available for cheaply gauging the global reflectivity, by measuring "earthshine" — the faint glow of our reflected light, seen on the dark portion of a crescent moon.

Using a small telescope and makeshift gear, astronomers easily showed that we reflect 30 percent of incoming sunlight back into space — a number that our satellite system got earlier, at a price tag of hundreds of millions of dollars. Such innovation will lessen the costs and confusions of global understanding, a help we shall need dearly as and if the greenhouse predicament worsens.

One way to think of global warming is that we are unknowingly acting on a time scale to which our global climate now responds sluggishly, taking about a century to manifest large shifts. Mother Nature takes her time, looking longer than the life span of individuals.

Any correction by technological intrusion will have to occur on far shorter ranges. Most politicians consider a few years the far horizon. Statesmen look longer, perhaps a decade. Getting nations to think over a century scale will be a prin-

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cipal challenge of the new millennium. At least for the first time, we shall be able to use an armada of diagnostics to discern effects, their time scales, and perhaps traces of the causal chain.

GEOENGINEERING

Surprisingly, some engineered systems appear possible to deploy now, and at reasonable cost. They could be turned on and off quickly if we get unintended effects. Small scale experiments could answer questions about how our current atmosphere behaves when one alters the kind of dust or aerosols in it. The biosphere is a highly nonlinear system, one that has experienced climatic lurches before (glaciation, droughts) and can go into unstable modes, too.

Some argue that this simple fact precludes our tinkering with the only Earth we have. Earth's climate might be chaotically unstable, so that a state with only slightly different beginning conditions would evolve to something markedly different.

Then the alighting of a single butterfly might change our future. But we also know that the Earth suffers natural injections of dust and aerosols from volcanoes, so probably experiments that affect the planet within this range of natural variability should be allowed.

Still, suppose a big volcano erupts while you are floating artificial dust high in the stratosphere—might this plunge us into a new ice age, pronto? Not if we keep our artificial dust well below the historical fluctuation rate; and without experiments we cannot make progress.

Global warming is assessed in a rather tightly knit community of scientists, mostly academic. They only study nature, while engineers dream of altering it.

Precisely as the larger public in the advanced nations becomes convinced that global warming is an immediate threat, worthy of response, they shall ask for solutions that command the least sacrifice. Why should so large and powerful a fraction of humanity not act to maximize their short-term interests, by minimizing economic and social inconvenience? They always have before.

This means the inevitable emergence of a new techno-visionary community, devoted to solving global ills with global technologies. But this is an old theme in environmental issues; like depletion of the

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ozone layer and cleansing of the seas, global warming has provoked an automatic politicizing of any proposed solutions at birth.

The simplest way to remove carbon dioxide from the air is to grow plants—preferably trees, since they tie up more in cellulose which will not return to the air within a season or two. Plants build themselves out of air and water, taking only a tiny fraction of their mass from the soil.

Forests cover about a third of the land, and have shrunk by a third in the last ten thousand years. Like the ocean, land plants hold about three times as much carbon as the atmosphere. While oceans take many centuries to exchange this mass with the air, flora take only a few years.

As tropical societies clear the rain forest, the temperate nations have actually been growing more trees, slightly offsetting this effect. In the U.S., we have lost about a quarter of our forest cover since Columbus, and replanting occurs mostly in the south, where pine trees are a big cash crop for the paper industry. But globally we destroy a forested acre every second. Just staying even with this loss demands a considerable planting program.

Trees soak up carbon fastest when young. Planting fast-growing species will give a big early effect, but what happens when they mature? Eventually they either die and rot on the ground, returning nutrients to the soil, or we burn them. If this burning replaces oil or coal burning, fine and good. Even felling all the trees still leaves some carbon stored longer as roots and lumber.

About half the U.S. CO_2 emissions could be captured if we grew tree crops on economically marginal croplands and pasture. More forests would enhance biodiversity, wildlife and water quality (forests are natural filters), make for better recreation, and give us more natural wood products.

Even better, one can do the cheapest part first, with land nobody uses now. This would cost about five billion dollars a year. A feel-good campaign would sell easily, with merchants able to proclaim their ecovirtue ("Sell a car, plant a grove of trees").

In the short run, this would probably work well. But trees take water, and hauling all the trees away for other uses exhausts the soil, so this is a solution with a clear horizon of about forty years.

Soaking up the world's present

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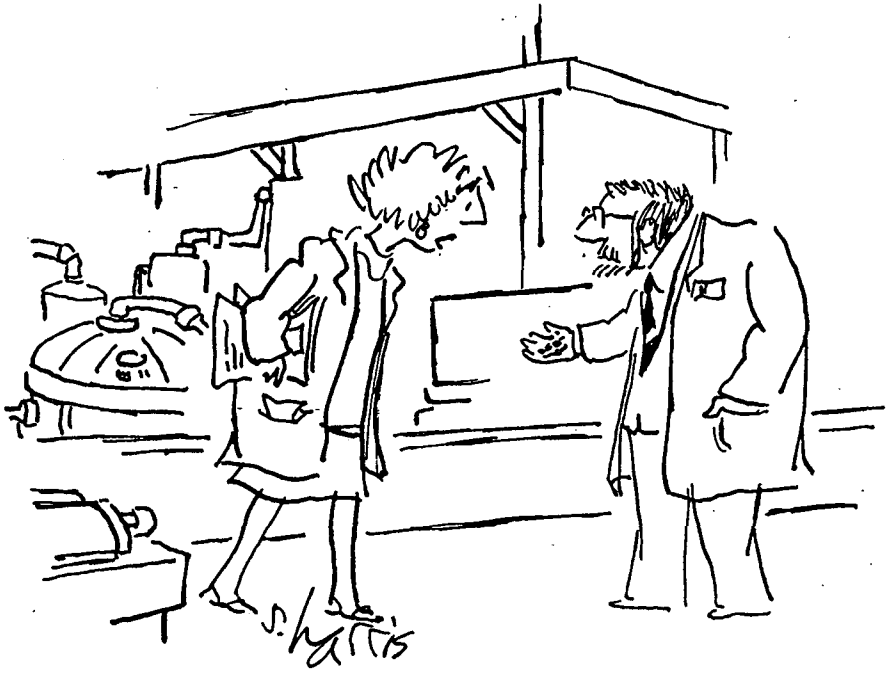
CO_2 increase would take up an Australia-sized land area, i.e., a continent. But most such land is in private hands, so the job cannot be done by government fiat in its own territories. Still, a regional effort could make a perceptible dent.

This is where the ecological community and those who think in terms of geoengineering part company. Growing pines is a stopgap that could offset up to 15 percent of our emissions up until 2050, but no more than that. We need something more.

Next time I shall explore the imaginative approaches, which promise to be effective and maybe even inexpensive. I fear we shall need them.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717, or to gbenford@uci.edu.



"I'm dubious. Neutrinos may be bigger than we thought, but they're not that *big."*

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Sheila Finch's last story to grace our pages was another tale of the Guild of Xenolinguists, "Out of the Mouths" (December 1996). Eventually, we expect that these tales of the spacegoing linguists will be linked in book form; if that book proves to be of the same quality as the absorbing adventure that follows, it'll be a doozy.

Reading the Bones

By Sheila Finch

I

SOMEONE WAS TRYING TO tell him something.

Ries Danyo wallowed round on the bench, peering through the tavern's thick haze, eyes unfocused by too much *zyth*. The sitar he didn't remember setting on the bench beside him crashed to the floor. The gourd cracked as it hit stone.

A male Freh sat beside him, the alien's almost lipless mouth moving urgently. The Freh had a peculiar swirling design tattooed from his forehead down the nose, and one of his hands was wrapped in a filthy rag. Ries stared at dark blood seeping through the folds. The alien spoke again, the pitch of his voice writhing like smoke.

Ries didn't catch a word.

Sometimes he wondered if the native vocalizations on this planet should even be called anything as advanced as language — especially the

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impoverished version the Freh males used. Not that his human employers were interested in actually having a conversation with these aliens. Just as well. He wasn't the lingster he'd been just five years ago.

The native liquor had given him a pounding headache and he needed to sleep it off.

The Freh's unbandaged, bird-claw hand shook his arm, urging him to pay attention. Dizziness took him. For a moment, he drifted untethered in a matrix of protolanguage, unable to grasp either the alien's Frehti or his own native Inglis to form a reply, a sensation closely resembling what he remembered of the condition lingsters called interface, but without the resolution.

A harsh burst of noise battered his eardrums, booming and echoing around the low-roofed tavern. He squinted, trying to clear his clouded vision. Two male Freh capered across the floor, arms windmilling. He started to rise —

And was knocked down off his chair and dragged behind the overturned table.

Thuds. Screams. The crowded tavern erupted into shrill pandemonium. Freh voices ululating at the upper end of the scale. Something else — a deeper footnote that brought the hairs up on his neck.

He tried to stand. The room cartwheeled dizzily around him. A pungent odor filled his nostrils — a stench like rotten flesh, decaying fungus. He had a sudden image of nightmare beasts rutting. The meal he'd just eaten rushed back up into his throat.

Something slammed into his back, toppling him again. He struggled out from underneath the weight. A pudgy juvenile Freh, shapeless in layers of thick, stinking rags, stared down at him for a moment, then scrambled away hastily. Ries sat on the floor in the wreckage, his head throbbing, his mind blank.

Tongues of flame flickered across the low ceiling; acrid smoke filled his lungs and made him cough. The coughing caused him to retch again. He doubled over.

"Talker." The alien with a bloody hand shook his arm. "Talker. Danger."

The sound of Frehti was like birdsong. Trying to make sense of such warbling, twittering and chirruping — problematic at the best of times —

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was impossible in his present state. He got maybe one Frehti word in every two.

He closed his eyes against the stinging smoke, the piercing screeches. *Maybe I really am dying,* he thought.

No exaggeration. Maybe not tonight, or tomorrow or even a month from now. But he sensed his body succumbing to death little by little, felt the slow tightening of *zyth*'s grip around his heart. He had a sudden vision — a splinter view of green foothills and sapphire lake — that closed down as rapidly as it opened. If he didn't give it up, he wouldn't live long enough to see Earth again.

Then he was aware of the bump and scrape of being hauled over benches, broken crockery, other bodies in the way.

He was too tired to resist.

One of the aliens had tried to give him a message last night.

The memory pricked him as he dropped a step behind the Deputy Commissioner's wife and her companions moving through the cloth merchants' bazaar. He shielded the flask of *zyth* he was opening from their sight and took a medicinal gulp. The demon that lived in that flask raced through his blood like liquid flame, and he felt his heartbeat quicken.

In his experience, stone sober or drunk like last night, the Freh had the most stunted language of any sentient beings in the Orion Arm. Even very early linguists from pre-Guild days had taught there was no such thing as a primitive language, and what was true on Earth had proved true through the Orion Arm: All languages the Guild of Xenolinguists had ever found were as sophisticated as their speakers needed. On the other hand, the Guild could be wrong; Frehti, the language spoken here on Krishna, could turn out to be an exception.

His head pounded as if he'd slammed it repeatedly into a stone wall, his skin was clammy, and his throat seemed to have been scrubbed with sand. He had no recollection of how he got back to his quarters in New Bombay.

It was not yet noon, but the heat was already fierce. Dust rose as he walked, making his eyes water. He sneezed, startling a small cloud of insects hovering about his face. Already he could smell the rich, chocolate odor of the river moving sluggishly past the edge of the native town. The

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monsoon would be here any day, bringing its own set of problems. There were no pleasant seasons on Krishna.

The native name for the planet was Not-Here. "*How can anybody say their own world isn't here?*" the Deputy Commissioner's wife had demanded when he'd translated this for her. "*No wonder they're all so useless!*" Krishna was too benign a deity to give name to this planet, he thought. Kali would've been more appropriate.

The DepCom's wife and fifteen-year-old daughter moved slowly down the line of stalls in the silk merchants' section, followed by the wife of some minor official in the human colony. The women dabbed sweat from their cheeks with one hand, fended off flying insects with the other. They took their time, the DepCom's spoiled daughter plucking with obvious irritation at her mother's sleeve. The girl's red hair which she'd piled on her head in a style much too old for her had come loose, and he could see damp strands of it stuck to the back of her slender neck.

The bazaar was crowded with small, plump aliens whose skin had a color and texture that reminded him of scrubbed potatoes. The males' faces were decorated with tattoos, crude as a child's scribbled designs, done in dark purple ink; the females went unadorned. Like many races he'd seen in the Orion Arm, the Freh were humanoid, as if once having found a good recipe, Mother Nature was loathe to throw it away, and no taller than ten-year-old human children. Their mouths had almost no lip, and their eyes were round and lacked lids. Like a bird or a reptile, they had a nictitating membrane that could veil their gaze, and their hands were four-fingered. The oddest thing about them was that such lumpish beings had mellifluous, birdlike voices.

Almost all of them here in the bazaar were male. They squatted along the edges of the narrow path between the stalls, leaned on poles supporting tattered silk awnings, or crowded around the stalls of foodsellers. Two thirds of the male population never seemed to have anything to do; their sole purpose in life seemed to be standing about half-naked, staring at each other and at the humans.

No more details surfaced from the events in the tavern. When he'd been younger, he'd bounced back vibrantly from nights like last night. Now they left him feeling a hundred years old, his body demanding more of what was killing its ability to function at all. He took another sip — the

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alcohol flamed in his throat — put the flask back in his pocket and caught up with the women.

He despised these shopping trips. The women argued and disparaged and forced the prices down to a level he was ashamed to translate. And then they'd take their shimmering purchases back up to the Residence and have something fussy made out of them. The DepCom's women liked the delicate textiles on Krishna, but they preferred the elaborate fashions they remembered from Earth, however inappropriate they might be in this climate. But even that wasn't the heart of his discontent. This was no job for a lingster, even one who'd fallen as far as he had.

Ragged awnings over each stall hung limp in the still air. The ever-present smells of the bazaar, rotting vegetables, flyblown meat, sewage running in open ditches behind the stalls, and the merchants' sweat-soaked rags filled his nose. A hand dimpled like a child's plucked at his sleeve, and he turned to see half-raw meat on a stick offered to him. The seller of the meat gazed at him.

He recognized a juvenile, still carrying the rolls of fat about its neck that marked immaturity. Behind the juvenile, rows of small, featherless, flying creatures the natives trapped were set to roast over a bed of coals alongside succulent red-brown tubers. He shook his head and regretted it when the hangover pounded again in his temples. The juvenile grinned. There was a youthfulness in all their faces, a bland childlike expression that never seemed to mature. The only difference between them as they grew was that while they stayed pudgy they tended to lose the exaggerated neck fat.

He'd never seen an old Freh, male or female, or even an obviously middle-aged one. He didn't know if this meant they died young, if they simply kept their old out of sight, or even if they put them all to death above a certain age. It was a mark of how little importance humans placed on the natives of this world, their customs or their language, that no xenoanthropologists had spent time here, and the xenolinguists initially sent by the Guild had spent precious little.

Across the alluvial plain on which the Freh town was built, Krishna's sun climbed the Maker's Bones till the eroded mountains glowed fiercely white like the skeleton of some extinct mammoth. He wiped a trickle of sweat from his neck, willing the women to hurry up. Sometimes they

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could go on like this for a couple of hours, examining bolts of iridescent material, picking and complaining.

The squatting merchants held their wares up silently, gazing incuriously at the human women, occasionally scratching simple marks on small squares of damp clay to keep track of their sales. They had no written language, and their arithmetic, on a base of eight, seemed not to be very flexible either. He glanced at an alien infant lying in a makeshift cradle underneath a stall; its parent paid no attention or perhaps was too lazy to swat the insects swarming over its face. The DepCom's wife had organized a wives' committee to teach Krishna's natives elementary hygiene; it didn't seem to be having much success.

"Danyo." Mem Patel crooked a finger at him. "See that bolt? Find out what this shifty-eyed thief wants for it."

For this elementary task the DepCom's wife required the expensive services of a Guild lingster. Mem Patel, like the rest of the human colony, hadn't bothered to learn anything of this language beyond "Kitchen Frehti," an impoverished pidgin of a very few alien words and her own native Inglis which she used with the female Freh who worked in the Residence.

"Danyo! The brocade this boy's holding!"

Beside the male alien, a female stood up, ready to bargain. She wore a shapeless brown garment and a necklace of plaited vines with a few gray clay beads that was no match for the garish blue designs on her mate's face. On Krishna it seemed to be the female's job to communicate; he wondered if perhaps males found it beneath their dignity to talk too much.

Before he could begin, the comlink the DepCom insisted he wear on these outings buzzed at his wrist. He held the tiny receiver to his ear.

"*Ries. I need you up here. Right away.*" Deputy Commissioner Chandra Patel's voice echoed inside his skull, disturbing the brooding hangover again as if it were a flock of bats.

Ries stared at his shaking hand. "Sir?"

"*Intelligence just in,*" the DepCom's voice said. "*Mules massing across Separation River.*"

In the little more than two years Ries had been here, he'd seen the pattern repeat every year. A handful of the second race on Krishna, nicknamed "Mules" by the humans for their long, horsey faces, came into the native town and ran wild for a few days just before the monsoon struck.

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Nothing serious, as far as anyone could tell. A few fights with their Freh neighbors, an occasional native shack burned to the ground. One of the DepCom's hobbies had been gathering information, anecdotal for the most part, about the Mules.

"It's monsoon weather, the silly season," he said, watching the women plucking fretfully at rainbow silks. "Mules don't pay attention to New Bombay."

"Maybe. But I found a record of an attack when the colony was founded fifteen years ago. Almost wiped them out."

The DepCom's daughter turned and, catching Ries's gaze on her, stuck her tongue out at him. He frowned at the girl and saw her laugh.

"The early commissioners kept very poor records," Patel said. *"Maybe we can't trust them. But I don't want to take chances."*

"Nothing the *Star of Calcutta* can't take care of, surely?"

"Bring the women back to the Residence, Ries. Immediately."

THE DEPCOM'S WOMEN hadn't been pleased. Ries had let their indignation wash over him, ignoring their shrill protests.

Back in his own quarters in the Residence, he poured a shot of *zyth* in a small glass. They'd been wrong at the Mother House to think he couldn't handle it. There was a lot of pressure in lingstering; some of the Guild's best people broke under the strain.

He leaned down to the computer on his desk and touched a key; the screen became a mirror. The action reminded him how long since he'd used the AI for the purpose it was intended; hours spent browsing through its copious files on the flora and fauna of Krishna didn't count. It was as superfluous here as he felt himself to be. A highly trained lingster and a superior AI with nothing to do, what a waste.

He frowned at his swollen face under tangled curls of dark brown hair — no gray showing yet — the line of his cheekbones blurred under the flushed skin, the blue eyes bloodshot like the tracks of a wounded bird over snow. He stepped away and noticed an extra couple of kilos around the waist.

He changed into fresh tropical whites, tugged a comb through his hair, erased the mirror and went out of his room. At the top of the stairs, he

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changed his mind, ducked back inside and grabbed the flask, which he tucked into a thigh pocket.

On the ground floor, a Freh houseboy with no understanding of how a central air system worked had left the doors of the Residence's great entrance hall wide open. A faint breath of humid air moved sluggishly inside, already laced with aerosols from the distant ocean's seasonal diatom bloom. Soon the monsoon would turn the streets of human enclave and native town alike into rivers of mud and the air into a smothering blanket laden with infection. He closed the doors.

Turning back, he found one of the houseboys silently moving across the hall. This one was draped in gaudy layers of red and orange silk. But today something fierce moved through the houseboy's small eyes before it was replaced by the servile, grinning expression the Freh adopted in human presence.

An arched alcove revealed a closed door. Ries knocked.

"Come in."

Chandra Patel glanced up from a large desk dominated by an oversize screen. The only sign of luxury here was the antique scarlet and gold carpet with a design of thatched huts and water buffalo that lay on the polished wood floor. Purchased from an impoverished museum in India and imported at great cost, it soothed Patel's occasional bouts of homesickness.

On the desk today Ries saw an uncharacteristically disorderly heap of papers, infocubes, and disks, as if the DepCom had lost patience and banged a fist down in their midst, jumbling them. The usually immaculate diplomat hadn't taken time to shave this morning, and the burgundy silk lounging robe he wore looked as if he'd slept in it.

"What haven't you told me?" Ries asked.

Across the room, Patel's tea kettle on a hot-stone and two cups of delicate porcelain waited on a small table. Ries took a pinch of aromatic black tea leaves from a canister, put one into each cup, then filled the cups with boiling water. Back turned to the DepCom, he poured a few drops of *zyth* from the flask into his own tea. He handed the other cup to the DepCom.

Patel said heavily, "The *Calcutta*'s on training maneuvers. Out of the sector. It'll take too long for her to get back."

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Tea forgotten for a moment, Ries stared at the DepCom. When humans had first arrived on this planet, the Freh who lived mainly in the lowlands along Separation River had been easily impressed by the display of superior technology into letting them settle peacefully. The DepCom was fond of pointing out that most Freh were living better now than they'd been before the advent of human colonists. Not to mention the stuff they managed to steal from the humans they worked for, his wife would add; colony wives had developed the necessary ritual of inventorying household property at least once a month.

The Mules seemed to be a different species than the Freh. Almost nothing was known about their history or their culture; their only observed behavior was this once-a-year mayhem visited on their neighbors. Ries himself had never even seen one close up. But the purpose of the small starship, *The Star of Calcutta*, was mainly to guard the planet against attack by the Venatixi, an alien race who bore no love for humans and whose violence intermittently scarred this sector of the Arm. Yet it seemed somebody had blundered, having the ship gone right now.

"But that isn't why I called you down here, Ries. Look at this." The DepCom indicated the screen with a brown hand. "I know you're interested in the Freh language. I think I've found something more bizarre."

Curious, Ries moved over to the desk to look. The one thing that had made his employment here bearable was Patel's friendship. It was the DepCom who suggested Ries make use of the sitar that had been his. The sitar, Ries remembered now, that had been damaged and then forgotten in a native tavern.

Before Patel could elaborate on what he'd found, the door opened and his wife hurried in. Nayana Patel — a short woman who might've been voluptuous in her youth — had changed into an elaborate red gown with voluminous skirts heavily embroidered in silver. He could see hints of the gown's Indian ancestry, but over-ornamented and fussy; the embroidery must've added at least a kilo to its weight.

"Chan!" she said sharply to her husband. "You must say something to the servants. Amah ruined my breakfast this morning. You'd think after all this while she'd have learned how to prepare naan. Now I find that she's run away."

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Nayana Patel called all the female house servants "Amah," refusing to learn their names in retaliation for what she saw as their refusal to prepare the vegetarian diet the Patels followed, and claiming she couldn't tell one from another in any case.

"Find yourself another servant, Naya."

Half a dozen silver bracelets on her wrist chimed musically as she moved in front of his desk. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, Chan. They've all gone."

Patel stared at her for a second, then abruptly turned back to his desk and pressed a button on a small pad. They waited in silence. He banged his hand on the pad again. Nothing happened.

"You see?" Mem Patel said. "We're alone in this great awful house. Left to fend for ourselves."

Remembering the odd, veiled look the houseboy had given him, Ries felt a tremor of apprehension slide up his spine.

"Ries." Patel said. "Get my family to the *Calcutta*'s base. Take my skipcar."

Mem Patel said petulantly, "I'm not going anywhere without you, Chandra."

"Stop arguing for once, Naya, and go with Ries. I'll follow as soon as I can."

She stared at him. "But I need to pack — "

"Get the children." Patel took her arm and steered her out the door. When she'd gone, he gazed at Ries. "I can trust you with my family, can't I?"

"Sir?"

"You're a good man when you're not drinking," Patel said bluntly.

Anger burned in his stomach. "You can rely on me."

"The bottom line, Ries," Magister Kai had said, "is that we can't rely on you anymore."

The Head of the Mother House of the Guild of Xenolinguists had turned his gaze out the arched window of his study as if autumnal rainclouds slowly obliterating Alpine peaks absorbed his full attention. Ries had been summoned back to the Mother House for retraining, something all lingsters were encouraged to do at regular intervals. Other

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lingsters caught up on new technology and techniques, but he was subjected to lectures from a new Head, a man less inclined to be indulgent than the one he'd known as a student twenty years ago.

"I see from the record that the Guild has given you a number of chances over the last three years." Magister Kai turned to face him again. "You were a very talented lingster in the beginning. But your addiction to native alcohols is a serious problem."

"It's under control now, Magister." What choice did he have but stay sober on Earth? They would've found and confiscated his supply at the port if he'd tried to bring any home with him.

"Is it, Ries? I'd like to think so. I'd like to think that all the years the Guild spent preparing you for service haven't been wasted after all. I'd like to believe that we could send you out into the field without worrying whether or not you'd be sober enough to do your job. But I find that belief hard to sustain."

His last assignment had been a disaster. He knew the Guild would've much preferred to send someone other than himself, but the client alien had expressed urgency, and he'd been the only experienced lingster close enough to take the assignment at the time.

"I was sick. Picked up some kind of native virus — "

"And dosed it with native alcohol," Magister Kai said. "Dangerously compromising the interface because you were out of control. Another time you, and the Guild, may not be so lucky. You do realize the risk you take?"

Lingstering was more of an art than a science for all the Guild proclaimed otherwise, and as an artist he'd found that some native liquors set his considerable talent free. That last time he'd managed to scare himself because it had taken him days to shake the demons that stalked through his skull.

There were hazards to mixing alcohol or any pharmaceutical, alien or otherwise, with the already volatile drugs of interface. The Guild had long ago learned to weed out candidates with sensitivity to Terran intoxicants, narcotics, stimulants, and hallucinogens, not even bothering to send them for treatment. Yet it was impossible to know in advance all the alien substances a human could become addicted to and develop appropriate immunogens.

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He'd begun the slide three years earlier when his young wife died. He'd promised her he'd be the rock under her feet; instead he'd let her die. The Guild told him there was nothing he could have done for Yv, even if he'd been there. There was nothing anybody could've done, they said. He didn't believe them; the Guild didn't approve of lingsters marrying. He'd been out of it on some native potion that morning, incapable of helping her when she needed him. Later, he drank to forget the damage the drinking had caused. And then he'd found he couldn't stop. The Guild had moved him from planet to planet, and on each he'd found something to ease his pain, something they couldn't immunize him against in advance. He didn't need some sanctimonious representative of the Guild telling him he should quit; he knew it. But he knew he wasn't ready just yet.

He said tersely, "I'm sober now."

"Perhaps you mean it this time." Magister Kai gazed at him for a moment. "And because of that, I'm giving you one last chance. The colony on Krishna was founded a dozen years ago. The aboriginal population is placid with the rudiments of a simple language. The lingsters who forged the interface set up the AI to handle it."

"Then why does anybody still need a lingster?"

"The Deputy Commissioner on Krishna, Chandra Patel, is an old friend of mine," Magister Kai said. "He wants a personal translator for his family."

SHOPPING FACILITATOR was more like it, he thought, as he left the DepCom's study. There wasn't even enough work here for a grade one translator. But he'd kept his word to Magister Kai. He hadn't missed a day of this boring and demeaning duty.

He crossed the hall. Through the high windows he saw the first wisps of cloud gathering over the jagged ribcage of the Maker's Bones. If Patel was right and the Mules intended to attack the human compound this time while the ship was offworld, there'd be real trouble.

He entered his own room and gazed at the mess he lived in. While the DepCom's wife packed, he'd better pull together a few things of his own. The only object of real importance he possessed was the fieldpack of interface drugs that all lingsters carried when they were on assignment.

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Not that he'd had any opportunity to use either the alpha or beta sequences in the whole two years he'd spent on Krishna, but no lingster ever walked off and left his fieldpack behind.

He thought of apocryphal stories of lingsters who'd come through disasters, triumphantly hefting their packs as if they'd faced nothing more than a routine interface. The stories were more propaganda than actual history, but the habit lingered. He strapped it on the hip opposite the flask.

To himself, at least, he had to admit that he'd loved the Guild once, when he was young. He still thought with fondness of his student days. It had seemed an almost holy endeavor to immerse himself in the mystery of language, and the Guild, monastic in its foundation in any case, did little to discourage this religious fervor in its lingsters. Yet there was something about the Guild that ate up a lingster's productive years, then spat him out, exhausted, cynical, and bereft.

Somewhere in the silent house he heard a muffled thud. Mem Patel, probably, bumping a trunk full of expensive clothes and baubles, and he'd be the one stuck with carrying it up to the roof. In a sour mood, he started up the stairs that led to the family's private apartments.

Another thump, behind him this time. Then a sharp crash of furniture overturned. And a scream.

He turned back too fast, triggering a giddy spell. For a second the stairs tilted crazily under his feet and he lost his footing, slipping down two steps. He grabbed at the stair rail for balance, then moved with great care across the hall till the dizziness subsided. The noise was coming from Patel's study.

Nausea rose in his stomach. He hesitated outside the door. Another scream.

He flung the door open on a nightmare scene and came instantly, sharply sober.

The DepCom lay on the antique carpet by his desk, the spreading pool of his blood obliterating its pastoral designs. One of Patel's hands clutched the shattered keypad of his terminal. Standing over him, a small, naked alien, with a face so covered in tattoos that the natural color of the skin hardly showed, held a blade like an elongated thin pyramid in one bloodstained hand.

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It took Ries several seconds to comprehend the incredible scene. Not Mule. The assassin was Freh. His heart lurched.

The plump little alien glanced at Ries. Two others, wearing only the Freh version of a loincloth, were ransacking the room, overturning chairs and emptying bookshelves.

He screamed at them in Kitchen Frehti: "Scum, obey your master." Lingster or not, it was all he could remember of the language in his shock.

The Freh holding the three-edged knife crimson with Patel's blood jabbered nervously. The other assassins reverted to familiar native behavior, shoving each other in their haste to scramble out the open window through which they'd entered.

Sick with horror, he let his eyes come back to the DepCom's lifeless body, glazed with its own blood. Then he dropped to his knees. Patel's fingers had flickered briefly.

Something clattered to the floor as he knelt. Ignoring it, he cradled the DepCom's bloody head in his lap. Close up, he caught the faint iron smell of the spreading blood.

"Ries," Patel whispered hoarsely. "I must tell you — Mules — Something I just learned — "

"Save your strength, Chan. I'll get help."

Weak fingers scrabbled at his sleeve. "Important. You must know this. The Freh — "

Patel's voice stopped. His head lolled back, his eyes stared unseeing into the lingster's own. Then his colorless lips moved soundlessly, and Ries read his last words: "Save my family."

He stared down at the dead man in his arms for a moment longer. Then he laid the head gently back down on the Indian carpet and stood up.

The assassin still stood, knife in hand, gaping stupidly at the result of his treachery. Ries took a step forward, and the alien bolted, scrambling out the window in his turn.

He glanced back one more time at the body, feeding a growing rage. The broken flask lay beside Patel, *zyth* running like a fiery oil slick over his bloody body.

The family's private apartment was at the end of a long hallway on the third floor. Ries skidded on wooden tile polished slick every morning by

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grinning Freh houseboys, the same ones — or their friends and neighbors — who now had the blood of Chandra Patel on their hands. Never in the fifteen years the human colony had been on Krishna had the Freh given any indication they could turn into killers.

The fogginess of the hangover he'd experienced earlier came back, clouding his thoughts as the shocking clarity of Patel's murder faded. He could use a drink — but he knew he had to stay sober now.

The DepCom's bedroom door stood ajar, and he heard the skreek of trunks being dragged across the wooden floor, the thud and thump of the family's frantic packing. He knocked once to announce his presence then went inside without waiting for a reply.

Three-year-old Jilan, the Patels' late-in-life child, sat in a heap of vivid scarlet and turquoise pillows on the huge bed, silently clutching a stuffed toy. Ries had always thought there was something fey about this child who'd been born on Krishna. The older daughter was adding her weight to her mother's as they tried to close an overstuffed traveling chest. Lita's eyes were deep brown flecked with gold, and when she'd finished growing out of her awkward years he imagined she'd be as exotic as a tiger. For now, she was a moody teenager, unpredictable as a cat.

"Danyo." Nayana Patel looked up and spotted him. "I can't find a boy to help us. Give me a hand with this."

"Respect, Mem, but we have to get out now. Leave it."

She stared at him, fussing absently at the long, elaborately pleated gown. "I can't go without — "

He grabbed the woman's elbow and turned her toward the door.

The younger daughter wailed. But the older daughter snatched at his sleeve, and he saw scarlet, long-nailed fingers.

"Don't touch my mother!" the girl ordered.

He removed her hands from his sleeve. "We don't have time to waste."

Mem Patel's eyes widened as she caught sight of the blood on his hands where her husband's head had rested. "Chandra?" she whispered. Color drained out of her dark face leaving it gray.

He was afraid she'd break down helplessly if he gave her the truth. But she obviously guessed the news was bad. She clapped a heavily-ringed hand over her mouth stifling her exclamation. Then she turned back to the

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bed, bracelets tinkling, and swept her younger child up. The toddler whimpered as the stuffed toy fell out of her arms. The big case she'd been packing forgotten now, the woman moved to the door.

Lita scowled, pushing a loose strand of copper hair back up on her head. He watched her grab up a smaller case that had been on the floor by the bed, feeling the heat of her dislike. "*What are you, Danyo?*" she'd once asked. "*Monk or fairy? Do you ever even look at women?*" How close she'd come to the truth; since his wife's death, he hadn't been with a woman.

Lita followed her mother to the door.

"Wait." He stepped in front of Mem Patel and looked cautiously around the open door.

The upstairs hallway was deserted, the great house silent, giving no hint of the carnage he'd witnessed downstairs. A sense of wrongness suffused the place. The stairwell leading up to the rooftop was at the opposite end of the hallway from the main staircase. No rooms opened off the hall at this point, no balconies or even windows that opened, and if they were challenged here they'd be cornered.

As the fugitives moved down the hall, a row of holo-portraits of former Deputy Commissioners watched grim-faced, white-robed men and women in ceremonial saris, whose most serious threat during their tenure on Krishna had been the upholding of Hindu customs in the face of Freh indifference and incompetence. To make eye contact with any one of them was enough to activate circuits that would deliver snippets of wisdom in the subject's voice. Some had chosen favorite axioms of diplomacy, others repeated cherished lines from the *Bhagavad Gita*. He didn't look at them. There was no advice modern or archaic they could give him; not one of them had faced a nightmare like this.

"You might not want to tell Mama the truth, Danyo," Lita's low voice said just behind him. "But you'd better soon tell me or I'm not going anywhere with you."

He glanced back at the girl's sullen face. "You don't have much of a choice."

"Pah! Your breath stinks of liquor," she said.

Jilan wailed and Mem Patel smothered her child's face against her own breast, muffling the sound. The woman's eyes glittered with tears,

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but she held her grief in silence. He shepherded the family along until they reached a door that led to the roof stairs. Opening it cautiously, he listened for sounds.

They were directly above a small, walled garden the Patels used for meditation, with a holo-statue of Krishna in a niche surrounded by flowers. It struck him then how the Patels clung to the things of home, how little they'd adjusted to this new life. Yet in this they were no different from the rest of New Bombay colony.

A damp wind was picking up, soughing through the trees on the other side of the wall. Tall and skinny, they reached as high as the flat roof of the Residence. The Freh called the trees "Spirit-Trap," the name serving to suggest again how little he really understood of the Freh or their language. The air was heavy with the clotted green smell of the coming monsoon. His sinuses tingled.

He stepped cautiously outside. Beyond the trees, he saw the other wall, the one that shut New Bombay off from the native town squatting at its feet like a scruffy beggar, and south of the town, Separation River. To the north and east was a great chain of mountains dropping down to foothills in the northwest where it was possible to cross to the rolling sweep of grasslands where the starship was based. Their only hope of safety lay in the *Star of Calcutta*'s base.

The DepCom's silver skipcar crouched on a bull's-eye pad in the center of the roof, an oversized mosquito about to launch itself into the sky. It was small enough that Mem Patel's luggage, if he'd let her bring it, would've made it unbearably crowded. He didn't need to know much about flying; the onboard AI would take care of most of it. The sooner they got onboard the better. He beckoned to the women.

His way was suddenly blocked by a Freh in a voluminous ankle-length, orange-brown garment. A white silk scarf, like all the natives wore during the season of blowing spores, covered his face.

"Talker. Wait," the alien said in Frehti. "No harm."

Mem Patel gasped, but if the mother was scared, the wildcat daughter certainly wasn't.

"Go from our way," Lita said in a high-pitched Frehti that Ries hadn't known she could speak.

The Freh stepped back a pace and allowed the white scarf to slide

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down, revealing sallow features and one lone tattoo squiggle that began on his forehead and ran down over one cheek. Ries recognized the male alien who'd been in the tavern last night; his name was Born-Bent. The Freh's spine seemed twisted out of alignment, raising one shoulder higher than the other and throwing the head off balance. One eye was dull amber, the other gray. "*What they'd call back home a sport,*" the DepCom had once commented, coming upon the malformed alien in the marketplace.

"What are you doing here?" Ries demanded in Frehti.

Born-Bent had done small services for him from time to time, but he'd never trusted the Freh.

Behind him, he heard the child's voice start up again in a rising whine of protest, and the mother's urgent hushing.

The Freh made a half servile, half nervous gesture with his head. "Danger here."

He became aware of the tremor in his hands and shut his fists to still it. "What do you want with me?"

The lipless mouth pulled up in an ugly caricature of a grin. "I do service. Then Talker do service."

He wondered suddenly if the name the aliens called him indicated respect or contempt. Probably the latter, since males didn't seem to hold conversations.

"What service?"

At that point, the little girl screeched loudly.

"What is it, precious one?" Mem Patel asked anxiously.

Born-Bent reached into his tentlike robe with his bandaged hand and pulled something out. "Take."

His hand rose instinctively to ward off attack before he saw what it was the alien held out: the sitar he'd left in the tavern. The cracked gourd that had formed the instrument's resonator at its base had been replaced with the shell of a large, native nut.

"This also."

Rhys looked down at a second object the alien laid on his palm. It seemed to be a small bone from an animal with some kind of marks scratched on its surface; at first glance, they resembled the scrawl of the primitive counting system used by the merchants in the bazaar. Yet as he gazed at the bone, something stirred in him, some sense of mystery.

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"What is it?"

"Soul bone. Give to the mothers."

He had to raise his own voice over the sound of the child's wailing. "What mothers? Where?"

"Beneath the bones. Go. Great danger."

The last thing he had time to do was carry a native relic to an alien graveyard. Ries shoved the bone into a pocket and looped the carry-cord of the sitar over his shoulder.

He turned back to Lita. "Get in the 'car."

"I don't take orders from servants."

"Lita!" Mem Patel scolded.

"Well — he is."

"Your Papa wishes us to go with Danyo, and so we will."

The girl scowled but turned toward the vehicle. He took the still shrieking, red-faced child from her mother. Jilan pummeled his arms with her fists.

Mem Patel suddenly seemed to understand the cause of her child's distress. "Where is it, sweetheart? Tell Mama."

Jilan pointed back toward the open door at the top of the narrow stairwell.

His skin prickled. For a moment he thought he'd heard the rumble of voices rising up the stairwell, the echo of tramping feet. He listened. Nothing.

"We have to leave, Mem. Now!"

The older girl was already in the skipcar; she leaned back out the door, holding her arms out to take her sister. He lifted the child up to Lita's waiting arms, then turned to help the DepCom's widow.

Nayana Patel was running back toward the stairwell door to fetch the child's toy, one hand clutching the ridiculously ornate skirt above her knees. Lita screamed. He lunged after Mem Patel, but Born-Bent grabbed him, pinning his arms. The Freh was surprisingly strong for his small size.

"Talker!" The alien said urgently. "You understand how words make."

As Nayana Patel reached the door, another alien appeared, his body naked but his face scarved in white. Ries caught the prismatic glint of a three-sided knife. Mem Patel screamed, the sound dwindling away into a

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gurgle as bright red arterial blood spurted high, hitting the lintel as she fell.

"Mama!" Lita wailed.

Two more Freh spilled out onto the roof, stepping carelessly over the downed woman.

He threw his weight against the sport. His head spun dizzily, but he caught Born-Bent off-balance and almost broke free.

Born-Bent punched him full in the stomach.

His knees buckled under him and air rushed out of his lungs. The alien dragged him across the roof and shoved him like a sack of vegetables through the door of the skipcar. Inside, the child's deafening noise echoed round the confined metal space. His belly scraped painfully over the ridged floor. Lita's long-nailed fingers scrabbled at his arm, pulling him in; her red hair had come loose from the clip, and long curls spilled over her face.

He glanced out the door again, just in time to see Born-Bent go down under the flash of a blade.

II

THE SKIPCAR WAS FLYING low over leafy Spirit-Trap treetops glowing olive by storm light. High crests whipped past only centimeters away. Lita Patel sat in the pilot's seat, frowning out the forward port at the horizon, where the gray-green of the jungle met the iron gray of the clouded sky. She'd had the presence of mind to get the skipcar airborne after Born-Bent shoved him aboard.

"Flying too low," he observed. His eyes were raw and his stomach felt bruised.

"Glad you're feeling better."

"Onboard AI — "

"Overrode it. I'm keeping us under the storm clouds."

He squinted at the jungle flowing like a dark river beneath them. "Didn't know you knew anything about flying."

"More than you, apparently." She turned to look at him. "You drink too much."

In the watery light he saw smudges under her eyes which were

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bloodshot as if she'd been crying. Her red hair had come completely loose now, tumbling over her shoulders.

And suddenly he knew that one of the things about her that irritated him so much was that her hair was the same rich color as his young wife's had been. Looking at this half-grown vixen triggered painful memories of his lost, sweet Yv. The sooner they reached the base and he could hand these two over to somebody else the better.

His head felt as if it had been hollowed out; the sound of his own voice when he spoke boomed and echoed inside his skull. He leaned forward and punched up the 'car's automap and studied it. The terrain between New Bombay and the base was hilly and wild; their route passed over a ridge thick with unbroken jungle, a tapestry in vermillion and umber.

"Danyo, I expect you to explain — "

"Not now."

"Then advise me. I've been trying to raise *Calcutta*'s base, but I get no response."

Even with the starship gone, there should be a skeleton maintenance crew left behind. He deactivated the map. "Try again."

She leaned forward and keyed a command into the pad. Nothing happened. "Why don't they answer? Is something wrong?"

He considered possibilities but decided not to share them. Ahead, a jagged spike of lightning streaked out of the black clouds and raced to the ground.

After a moment, she said in a whisper that couldn't hide the shakiness of her voice, "Tell me the truth now, Danyo. My father's dead too, isn't he?"

If they were going to have any chance of getting through this, she would have to grow up. There was no way he could make it painless. "The Freh killed him."

She closed her eyes, and he saw her small white teeth biting her lower lip. She had her mother's ability to absorb terrible news and not cry out. He couldn't remember the death of his own parents — he'd already been on assignment for the Guild — but he knew it wasn't under terrible circumstances like these. He felt there was something he ought to say to her but couldn't think of anything appropriate.

They skimmed over the wind-churned treetops in silence again for a

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few seconds. Rain spattered in a crazy staccato on the forward port. They'd be lucky to make it to the base before the storm caught them.

Finally, he said lamely, "I'm sorry."

She stared resolutely ahead. "We have to get to the *Calcutta* now."

He hadn't been able to weep after Yv's death. Like Lita, he'd found no time for grief. Instead, he'd taken the way past the pain of living through a bottle of whatever a planet offered. But that had been just another kind of lie.

"The ship isn't at the base right now."

"Not there? Then — "

She didn't get to finish her thought. The little skipcar shuddered as if hit by a giant fist, rolled tail over nose and headed straight down for the forest floor.

When he opened his eyes again, he was dangling upside down from the seat webbing, the floor of the skipcar above his head. Branches poked their way in through broken ports. A long jagged spike of what was supposed to be shatterproof plastiglass was poised above his neck. It took him a moment to figure out that the 'car must have been caught in a tree that had broken their fall.

What the hell're we going to do now?

The silence made him nervous. Supporting his weight with one hand on a strut, he wriggled cautiously round until the glass no longer threatened to impale him. Now he could see the pilot's seat.

Empty.

He craved a shot of *zyth* to steady his nerves, but he knew he was going to have to do this alone from now on. The thought scared him. Then he abandoned caution and twisted in the web until he could see the back. Also empty. If they'd been ejected —

"You're conscious," Lita said leaning in the window, careless of the splintered glass.

He stared upside down at her. "I thought you might've been killed."

"You don't have that much luck, Danyo." Her expression, wan beneath the coffee-brown skin, gave the lie to the bravado of her words.

"We must've been struck by lightning." He wondered if the onboard AI had been badly damaged, and if it contained a self-repair program.

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"I got Jilan out first in case the 'car burned."

She indicated where her sister sat, finger in her mouth, at the foot of a tangle of slender jungle trees. Long emerald fronds dripped rainwater on her.

He noticed that Lita had removed the ornate overskirt she'd been wearing at home — the thought brought back an unwelcome image of Mem Patel's skirt spattered in blood — revealing sturdy brown legs in serviceable shorts. She carried the skirt slung over one shoulder like a cloak. The little strap sandals on her feet were not so practical.

His seat web was jammed and it took time to free himself. Lita helped, supporting him to take tension off the web's fastening.

"Devi! You weigh too much," she grumbled.

He turned, allowing his legs to slide slowly down to the ceiling that was now the floor, and felt the sitar bump against his head. For a moment he considered leaving it behind. But it had been Patel's, and Born-Bent had gone out of his way to mend it and bring it back. It really didn't weigh that much, he thought. The sitar's carry cord had caught in the seat web and had to be untangled. A lightweight jacket he'd thrown into his pack had snagged on the cord too, and came with it.

He rolled himself cautiously out of the wrecked 'car and stood beside the girl in the wet forest. Immediately, his sensitive sinuses tingled painfully.

"Jilan's hungry," Lita said. "She hasn't eaten since — "

He felt heat on the back of his neck and turned to see the skipcar burning. He stared at it for a moment. The forest was too damp for the fire to become a threat, but he hadn't had time to get their belongings out.

"You see?" she said. "Now what?"

Krishna wasn't a world that invited tourism. He knew few things about the foothills other than they were wild and dotted with small Freh villages where some of the bazaar's vendors lived. He'd trusted the skipcar's AI to get them to the base without knowing exactly where it was. Now he was certain of only one thing: They dared not stay here in the jungle, so close to the chaos in New Bombay.

"Now we go on foot," he said.

Lita scuffed a toe in the grass that formed a thick, waist-high carpet under the trees, and drops of water flew off the stalks. "Not much of a path. And what about Jilan? This is over her head."

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He glanced in the direction she indicated and saw the little girl pushing her way through grass that reached her shoulders. As he watched, she stumbled and fell, disappearing under a green wave that closed over her. If she went off on her own, they could easily lose track of her.

"I'll carry Jilan."

"Do you know what direction we should take?"

He didn't, but he wasn't going to admit that. Spirit-Trap trees hid the mountains from sight, and the sky was too overcast for him to get his bearings from the sun. If he climbed one of the trees, he'd get a better sense of which way to go, but these trees were too thin to take his weight. He had no idea how many hours had passed since they'd fled New Bombay. He had to do it soon, or what little daylight was left would be fading.

He picked up the toddler and settled her on his shoulders where she twined her fingers in his hair, leaning her head drowsily against his. She was heavy, but at least she'd given up that awful screaming. He wasn't used to children, and he'd never had much contact with this one in New Bombay; she'd stayed most of the time in the nursery with the family's personal servants.

"Be careful with my sister," Lita warned. "She's very upset."

He glanced at the older girl. It wasn't the first time he'd noticed her interpreting for her silent sibling. "Doesn't she speak for herself?"

"Why should she? My mother spoiled her. And the amahs did everything for her. Everybody around her did the talking."

Three was late for a child to begin talking, he thought. All healthy human babies were born with impressive linguistic skills. Jilan should be conveying her thoughts with some fluency by now, not relying on others to do it for her.

Somewhere a stream rushed by, hidden in the dense undergrowth, chattering urgently to itself. The sharp, clear scent of water lay like a descant over the darker notes of wet soil and thick plant-life. Enormous magenta and scarlet blossoms hung from vines that climbed the tree trunks; smaller, acid yellow flowers lit up the shadows beneath them. Clouds of eyeless insects whirred by; guided only by the smell of the flowers, they blundered constantly into the humans' faces. He pushed his way through the high grass and Lita followed.

"These sandals are rubbing my feet," she complained at one point.

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He wouldn't have believed the brutal carnage they'd left behind in the Residence was the work of Freh if he hadn't seen them himself. Something had caused the normally placid aliens to rise up against the humans. If they'd been harboring deep resentment against the colonists all these years, they'd done a good job of hiding it. He tried to remember if he'd ever sensed anger or even reluctance in the native behavior, but all the images he conjured up were of bland, incurious, passive faces.

"*You understand how words make.*" Born-Bent had been wrong; he didn't understand at all. There were obviously huge gaps in his knowledge of how Frehti operated. He wished he could take the problem back to the Guild, let his old teachers play with it. He imagined them as he'd known them in his youth. Magistra Eiluned, old already when he'd first come to the Mother House, and Dom Houston who'd believed that every language served only to disguise. Was Frehti disguising something he should know? In memory he saw them gathered round the seminar table while the warm green smell of summer flowed through tall windows and cuckoos spoke from sunlit apple orchards.

A stifled exclamation at his side brought him back. Lita had caught one of her flimsy sandals in a wiry grass strand. He put out a hand and steadied her.

When the sandal was settled back on her foot, she glanced up at him. "Do you have any idea what caused that...that...what happened back there?"

Her voice wavered, but he could tell she was determined not to let him see her terror. Hair in disarray, clothing streaked and torn, she was, after all, hardly out of childhood herself.

"Time to talk about it later," he said.

Something had happened in the native tavern. Born-Bent had tried to give him a message and perhaps been killed for it. Then the DepCom had tried to share something he'd learned. Again, something important enough for a man to waste his dying breath trying to communicate. He had a sense of huge pieces of information lacking, questions without answers. Until he understood the deadly puzzle, he and the DepCom's children were in mortal danger.

When they'd gone a few hundred meters through the dense undergrowth, he found what he was looking for. An old Spirit-Trap with a thick,

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gnarled trunk shoved its head up through the canopy formed by its younger neighbors. He let the child and the sitar slide gently down to the wet grass. Jilan clung to his leg for a moment, staring up at him wide-eyed, but she made no sound. He was beginning to find the child's silence unnerving.

"Wait here a minute," he said. "Okay?"

Jilan didn't answer.

"What're you doing now?" Lita asked as he began to climb. She seemed to have pulled herself together again. "You'll never make that, Danyo. You're out of shape."

The smooth trunk was slick from the rain but free of the clinging vines. Near the top, the main trunk split into three, and he could go no further as each thin limb bent under his weight. He sat in the security of this three-pronged Y, blood pounding in his temples, leaning out precariously to gaze over the surrounding forest.

The rain had stopped and the sun had already set, leaving a diffuse glow in the banked clouds on the horizon. To his left, the storm had cleared, and he saw the first faint spark of the constellation the Freh called "The Thief." Below it, a white smear, a tail end of the home galaxy that the Freh knew as "Sorrow-Crossing" gleamed faintly. Somewhere down that soft wash of light, a small blue planet orbited a sun too insignificant to be visible this far away.

He looked away. Fugitives couldn't afford the luxury of being homesick.

They were on the slope of one of the foothills, a gentle rise that he hadn't noticed as they'd trudged through the thick jungle. He gazed across canyons choked with dark vegetation and saw Separation River, glowing like a pewter ribbon in the twilight, winding across the alluvial plain. He thought of his first impressions of Krishna as the shuttle ferrying him down from the starship came in through the atmosphere: A lush green planet laced with shining waterways, signs of squalid habitation appearing only after the shuttle landed.

In the foreground, downslope, he noticed a number of trees seemed to be leaning crazily, and he realized he was staring at the skipcar's crash site. Then his attention was pulled back to the distant human settlement on the banks of the river. It seemed as if it were illuminated. As he stared, it

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erupted in a fountain of flame that turned the bluffs crimson. New Bombay was on fire.

"How much longer are you going to stay up there?"

It was completely dark on the forest floor when he slid back down the tree again, but his eyes retained the after-image of flame. The DepCom had thought danger would come from the wild Mules, yet it was the placid Freh who'd rebelled, and that was more frightening.

"Well, did you find which way we have to go?"

"I think so."

No sense passing on to her what he'd learned from the AI of carnivores on Krishna. As if to underline his concern, the leathery black shape of a huge nightbird slipped between the trees and swept past his shoulder. He heard the slap and creak of its featherless wings.

And he heard something else. Something more menacing than a wild animal.

"What? Danyo, why're you pushing me?"

"Up there." He jerked his chin at the tree he'd just climbed down. "We'll wait up there till it's light."

"But I don't climb trees. And what about Jilan?"

He shoved the hesitating girl toward the tree. "Get your foot up on that bole there. Then the other. Keep going!" He slung the sitar over his shoulder, grabbed the child up and held her close to his chest with one hand, reaching into the tree's darkness for a handhold with the other. The fieldpack dug into his hip as the child clasped her legs around him.

Lita seemed to pick up his urgency and she climbed quickly. He followed, burdened by the child and the sitar which he couldn't leave behind in the damp grass. It banged into his shoulder blades with each movement. Scared by the ascent, the little girl made it worse by clinging tightly to his hair. Lita's foot slipped twice on the damp trunk and struck his fingers, almost knocking him off. The child struggled, and he had a hard time hanging on to the slippery bark.

"Stay calm!" he commanded.

She whimpered but stopped struggling. Lita had now reached the Y where he'd stopped earlier; he pushed the child up into her down-stretched hands. Relieved of Jilan's awkward weight, he scrambled up after her.

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He heard the harsh intake of Lita's breath as she turned toward the plain of Separation River. The entire sky to the south and east was lit by the lurid glow of the fire, and under it the wet leaves of the forest canopy glittered redly as if they'd been drenched in blood.

Below them, the forest suddenly filled with screams — the crash of bodies running blindly through undergrowth — a high-pitched keening that brought the hairs up on his neck and arms. A sudden smell like putrefying flesh rose up to his nostrils.

"Merciful Lord Krishna!" Lita exclaimed, her hands clasped over her nose. "What is it?"

At the foot of the tree that sheltered them, a naked, spindly-legged creature, its corpse-white skin hanging in folds like a too-big overcoat hastily thrown over spikes of underlying bone, wrestled a plump Freh female to the ground. The Freh shrieked and thrashed about as the other alien covered her; Ries could see her fists pummeling the larger alien's shoulders — a male, he could see its elongated penis and scrotal sack — and he heard the stream of scolding she gave vent to in her birdlike voice. The male made no sound in reply.

This was the first Mule he'd ever seen close up, and he was stunned by the height and emaciation of the alien. The powerful reek of their violent mating rose up in a thick cloud till he thought he would vomit.

Then it was over. The Mule stood up, his long, horselike head turning slowly, the overlarge ears pricked as if they were listening to sounds out of human range. Then he vanished wraithlike into the trees. A moment later, the Freh female picked herself up from the ground, brushed leaves and dirt off, then strolled away as if nothing had happened.

It made no sense. The Freh and the Mules were separate species; that was obvious at a glance. Had he misunderstood what was happening?

Lita was crying now. The mask of arrogance and precociousness that marked the teenager in the bazaar this morning had dropped away. The younger daughter stared up at him, her eyes wide with fright, her hands gripping the front of his jumpsuit.

"She looked like one of Jilan's amahs," Lita said in a wobbly voice. "What're we going to do, Danyo?"

"We'll stay up here for the night. In the morning, we'll make plans."

He put one arm around each of them, drew them close to share a little

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warmth, and thought about what she'd just said. The girl obviously didn't share her mother's boast that she couldn't tell one Freh from another.

The lurid glow in the sky over New Bombay gradually faded. The storm had blown over for the time being, leaving a sky bright with alien constellations and the white trail of Sorrow-Crossing. The planet had no companion in its orbit round its sun; Krishna's night sky was perpetually moonless. He looked down. Now the wet leaves mirrored the fierce glitter of stars.

When it was light again in the morning, he'd try to remember information browsed in the computer's library about edible plants and roots. One protein-rich, red-brown tuber the natives roasted over hot coals, he'd tasted in the bazaar. The Freh used the husks to make the dye they favored for their own robes. If he could find some tomorrow it would solve the food problem.

Something dug into his ribs where the child clung to him. He took Bom-Bent's soul bone out and examined it curiously. It was about the size and width of his own index finger, and in the starlight its surface gleamed almost as though it were translucent. He ran his finger over the symbol scratched on it, but it yielded no secrets to him. The mothers — whoever and wherever they were — would know what to do with it, the Freh had said. If he survived long enough to find them.

After a while, the girls slept, but he remained awake and watchful for a long time, listening to the sounds of flight and evasion and bestial rutting that came from all directions, punctuated with an ominous animal roaring that brought to mind the chilling sights and sounds of jungle life he'd found in the AI's library.

HE SLEPT FITFULLY. Shortly before dawn, he dreamed Yv was drowning in Separation River. She was wearing the sky blue dress she'd worn on their wedding day, and her outstretched hands implored him to help while he stood on the other bank, unable to reach her.

When he woke, his head had the sticky, cobweb-filled feeling he knew well, a clogged dullness that *zyth* caused and only *zyth* could remove.

His muscles jumped and trembled this morning. Fire raced down the nerve paths, and sweat broke out on his brow in spite of the cool morning.

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He felt weak, drained, ready to give up, desperate for the courage *zyth* could give him, even if it didn't last.

The forest had dissolved in a pearl-white mist that dripped off the leaves. He looked down at Jilan, still nestled in the crook of his arm. She was awake, gazing up at him, thumb in mouth, her face puffy and tear-streaked. *This wasn't part of my Guild oath!* But for the child's sake, he had to pull himself together.

Lita was kneeling in the tall grass in the gray light, emptying something out of her skirt which she'd used as a basket. Wisps of fog drifted slowly over the ground.

She glanced up at him. "I found breakfast while you were still snoring."

He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of seeing her barbs strike home. He let the sitar slide down until it was low enough to drop safely into her outstretched hands. Then he grasped Jilan with one shaky hand and with the other lowered himself down to stand beside Lita. The little girl wriggled free and clutched her sister's arm. Lita pulled her sister down to sit on the ground close beside her, then indicated a mound of thumbnail-sized, dark purple berries.

"The houseboys sometimes brought us berries," she said. "They looked a bit like these."

He picked one out of the mound and raised it cautiously to his nose, then broke the berry open with a fingernail and gazed at the honeycomb of tiny segments surrounding a small oval seed. "This one's okay."

He handed it to her and picked up another.

"You mean you're going to do that with each one?" she asked, her disbelief obvious. "But they all came from the same bush. If one's okay — "

"Three kinds of berries all grow on one bush. They all look alike on the outside. The one I gave you is female, safe to eat. Another kind contains the male chromosomes, a kind of red dust that will make you sneeze and your stomach cramp, but it won't kill you. The third is sexually neuter. It's designed to kill the plant's enemies that mistake it for one of the other two."

She clapped her hands over her mouth. "But I was so hungry, and they looked — Danyo, I already ate one!"

"Does your stomach hurt?"

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She shook her head.

"You were lucky. Next time, wait for me."

"I was only trying to help," she said in a small voice.

He sat cross-legged on the wet ground and sniffed, split and sorted the berries, discarding most of them, stopping to sneeze frequently. Both sisters watched him work. Finally he took a berry from the smallest pile and — to reassure Lita — put it with great show into his own mouth. Then he turned that pile over to her.

"Those you can eat safely."

"You're only going to eat one berry?"

"I'm not hungry."

He didn't tell her that *zyth* was distilled from the poisonous form of these berries, made safe only after a long period of fermentation, and perhaps not even then. Hunger for *zyth* rose up from his bowels like a starved beast, all claws and teeth, overwhelming his body's need for food. For a moment he considered saving the dangerous berries. If he put one under his tongue, sucked it, didn't chew —

He stood up abruptly and walked away from temptation.

While the children ate their meager breakfast, the sun rose and the mist gradually melted off the grass. A fallen tree trunk provided a place to sit. He unslung the sitar from his shoulder, settled it in his lap and began to explore the strings with a hand that wouldn't stop trembling. The native nut that had replaced the cracked gourd changed the resonance, and he compensated for it as much as he could. He really needed a wire plectrum to pluck the strings, but that hadn't been in his pocket when Born-Bent returned the lost instrument to him.

His fingernails were still caked in the DepCom's blood. He wiped his hand clean in the wet grass.

Lita came over to sit beside him as he finished. Her red hair tangled over her shoulders, and pink juice from the berries stained her mouth. Jilan was drawing on a patch of bare ground, using a piece of dry grass she'd pulled from the forest floor. Absorbed by her work, the child paid no attention to them. The two looked nothing alike, he thought. Lita would be as voluptuous as her mother but taller when she matured; the child was elfin-faced and seemed destined to be small and delicate.

"That was my father's sitar," Lita said.

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"Yes."

"Play something."

He picked out an old song he'd learned as a student, a lament for time past and homeland lost, like a thousand similar dirges sung in different languages over the millennia by humans who'd been explorers and wanderers since they emerged from the primal ocean.

"Sad. It reminds me of Earth."

He set the instrument down on the ground beside him.

"I never learned to play. I think it would've pleased my father if I had." She ran one fingertip down the length of a string. "I've been away so long, it's hard to remember Earth, let alone India. Have you ever been to India?"

He shook his head and stood up, working on tension in his neck and shoulders.

"One thing I remember is a white house in the mountains, near the headwaters of the Ganges. We lived there in the summertime. We had peacocks and monkeys in the gardens — "

She broke off. He watched her staring into the distance, the rising sun illuminating half her face, highlighting the dark cheekbones so that she seemed a bas-relief carving of a young goddess on a temple wall.

In the silence, he bent down and retrieved the sitar, sliding an arm through its carry-cord. "Time to move on."

After a while she said, "You must've met lots of aliens."

"A number. They're not all pleased to meet Homo sapiens."

She scrambled to her feet and took her sister's hand. They stepped out through tough, wiry grass that grew up to the height of the child's head. He took Jilan from Lita and swung her up onto his shoulders. The child grasped the neck of the sitar as she rode, which didn't prevent it from banging his back but tightened the carry-cord as it passed across his throat.

Lita walked beside him. "How did you know about the berries?"

"There was a wealth of information in the AI's library. Your father seemed to be the only person in New Bombay who was interested in it."

She was silent for a moment, then she said, "You don't like me very much, do you?"

"Not important. I have to get you to safety."

"Well, maybe it's mutual." She halted, staring at the stark peaks,

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bones shrouded in funereal gray mist. "I hate this planet. Especially those ugly mountains."

He glanced up without slowing his pace. "The Maker's Bones?"

She caught up with him again. "And why do they have that name? Do the Freh believe in a god called the Maker? Is he supposed to be buried up there or what?"

"I haven't seen any evidence the Freh have a god."

"How can that be? All primitive races have gods or goddesses."

Before he could answer, something crashed through the undergrowth ahead of them. He seized Lita's arm and pulled them all down behind a tall clump of the bushes. Jilan whimpered and pressed her face against his chest.

The noise grew closer, and now they could hear snuffling — growling — keening —

"What is it?" Lita whispered, her breath warm at his ear.

Three figures emerged from the trees, a tall Mule male with deep-set eyes and two male Freh, one a juvenile, wrapped in rags and still showing the distinctive rolls of adolescent neck fat. The Mule tackled the naked adult Freh and wrestled him to the ground. They rolled over and over in the grass, the Mule grunting, the Freh screeching, and both pounding each other, at one point coming so dangerously close to the humans' hiding place that Ries smelled the Freh's sour sweat and the rancid odor of the Mule.

The Mule appeared to be trying to sink long fangs into the Freh's arms while the juvenile stood by, shrilling and gesturing with his four-fingered hands. Ries would never have guessed from the starved look of the Mule that he would be so strong, but he was obviously getting the better of the sturdier-looking Freh.

As abruptly as the sexual encounter had ended last night, this fight ended. Now the combatants separated, not looking at each other, sat up and brushed dirt off themselves. A long moment passed. When he finally stood, the Mule's thin arms were as long as his legs; Ries saw the bones clearly through the skin as if the alien were a walking anatomy demonstration.

The Freh turned unblinking eyes in the direction of the hidden humans, but far from signaling defeat, there was something that seemed

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glutted and satisfied in that expression. There was some unexplained connection here, some clue he was missing that would explain the bizarre interaction between these two species that he'd witnessed last night and today, but he had no idea what it could be.

Through all this, the juvenile continued to wail. Suddenly, the Mule seemed to become aware of the noise for the first time. With a roar that was almost too deep to come from such a sunken chest, he now turned on the younger Freh. At first Ries thought he meant to kill the juvenile, but he saw that the Mule's intention was to drive him away. The juvenile took a step back, his eyes large with fear, arms flapping ineffectually in front of his face. The Mule lunged forward.

Then, to Ries's astonishment, the adult Freh joined the chase. At this, the juvenile turned and ran. The Mule and the adult Freh both ran after him. The sounds of the chase gradually died away behind them and the silence of the forest returned. Ries blew breath out, releasing tension.

"I want to go home!" Lita clutched her little sister.

He sighed. "New Bombay burned last night. You saw the fire."

"Not New Bombay. Earth."

He didn't think any of them had much chance of ever seeing Earth again.

Warm rain pelted them without ceasing, and sodden blind bugs crashed against their faces and hands. He'd given his light jacket to Lita, who was carrying her sister on her back; both of them huddled under it. Their hair hung limp and wet over faces streaked with mud. Lita's flimsy sandals had disintegrated in the rain, and now she wore his boots, lashed around her ankles with vines to prevent them from falling off. His own feet were protected only by socks with strips of tree bark to fortify the soles, also secured with vines; leaves jiggled festively as they walked. The tropical white jumpsuit he'd put on yesterday morning was now filthy and ripped.

Lita seemed in better spirits this morning. He heard her murmuring to her sister, telling her how close they were to the *Calcutta*'s base, how soon they'd be there. Maybe he'd had the same optimistic resiliency when he was her age; he certainly didn't now. He trudged, head down, water pouring down his back. His empty stomach protested constantly and his

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tired muscles ached. His nerves shivered with need, and it was hard to stop thinking about *zyth*. One shot of it would be like grabbing power lines in his bare hands, electricity racing across the connection, burning, energizing.

It would be so much easier to give up, lie down, surrender —

I am a channel... Through me flows the meaning of the Universe...

The words of the lingster's mantra rose unbidden in his mind, dragging him back from the abyss. *First was the Word and I am its carrier.*

He had to go on. There was no choice; the Guild had seen to that. The Guild had branded him, and there was no removing the mark from his soul. Alien alcohol was his attempt to break the bond and it had failed, just as it had failed to take away the pain of Yv's death.

He swatted insects and moved on. He was glad for the small relief of being rid of the younger child for a while, and not just because of the burden of carrying her extra weight on his back. Jilan's continuing silence was unnerving. She didn't respond to anything he said to her. He had no idea what to do about her.

If Yv had lived, he wondered, would she have wanted children? One of them would've had to leave the Guild since the Guild discouraged child-raising by its lingsters. Would she have done so gladly? Could he have accepted her decision, whatever it might've been? A memory surfaced: She lay under him in a grove of giant, singing ferns on an exotic world, the first time they'd made love; the wild red hair spilled over her small, firm breasts, her eyes in shadow the color of moss, a sprinkling of rosy freckles over her nose. He ached to realize there were things about his young wife he hadn't had time to learn.

Underneath his thoughts, like an evil mantra, the need for *zyth* pulsed. He should've gathered the berries. He could go back — just a small detour — It took all his fading strength to prevent his feet from leaving the path and turning back.

First was the Word...

The depth of his need for *zyth* terrified him. He had to escape this nightmare addiction before it was too late, and abstinence was the only way to free himself.

The jungle gave way slowly to the sparser vegetation of the hill country; trees were not so towering here, their leaves sprouting higher up

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the trunk. And the grass no longer grew so tall. With a sigh of relief, Lita put her sister down on the ground.

They heard it first: an insistent murmur like faraway traffic, growing to an animal roar. Then the ground sloped under their feet and they came out suddenly from the forest to stand on a bank where trees tumbled down a ravine to the west. Through the bare branches they glimpsed water, an emerald cascade flashing over the rock face in the subdued light and racing away through the undergrowth. One of the many tributaries of Separation River with its headwaters in the mountain range they were skirting, it lay directly in their path, too wide and flowing much too fast for them to cross.

His mind woozy with fatigue, he stared at it, trying to remember the automap he'd consulted before the skipcar crashed. There shouldn't have been a river that size anywhere near. How had he gone wrong?

"What do we do now?" Lita asked, her voice husky.

It was a fair question. New Bombay was gone. The *Calcutta*'s base was probably deserted but better than nothing if he could've been certain he could find his way across this country. Which apparently he couldn't.

Then he thought of something. "You speak Frehti."

A spot of color came and went on her high cheekbones. "Well, I've learned a little."

More than a little, I'll wager, he thought. "Do you remember what the Freh sport said to us as we left the Residence?"

She frowned. "Something about his mother?"

"Not his mother. 'The Mothers.' I think it's a title."

"Well, where do we find them?"

"*Under the bones,*" the misshapen alien had said, and he'd imagined a graveyard of some sort. But now he realized it meant The Maker's Bones, the sharp-toothed mountains to the north. They'd been heading north-west when the skipcar went down, crossing the foothills to get to the base. They needed to change course.

"North-east and uphill, I think."

"Up *there*?" she asked, her voice full of skepticism.

"Could be our only hope for help."

"Who's to say these 'Mothers' will be friendly? The rest of the natives aren't."

"We don't have a lot of options."

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She heaved a deep sigh for his benefit. "How far?"

"Far enough."

He gazed up at the distant peaks. Perhaps a two-day journey on foot, maybe longer, because of the child. The rain was bad enough here where the thinning trees still provided some shelter. Up on the ridge, they would be exposed to the full force of monsoon winds and torrential rain, and the cold of high altitude at night. It would take all his strength to get them through this, but he had no strength anymore. They needed — deserved — a far better guide.

Lita was right, whether the Mothers would shelter them was doubtful, but he couldn't think of an alternative. And there was nobody else around to help them.

He selected a peak shaped like the broken tooth of a jungle beast as a reference point, then lifted Jilan off her sister's back.

"Let's get moving," he said.

III

FOR THE NEXT two days they made slow progress over rugged ground, keeping the distinctively shaped peak in sight at all times. The land sloped steeply up through boulders and rocky outcropping; the tall, tropical growth of the jungle floor gave way swiftly to low, wind-battered trees with sharp needles instead of leaves. Cold rain sleeted down all day. The ground beneath their feet turned to mud, slowing their progress further.

"We'll take a break here." He indicated an isolated clump of stunted Spirit-Traps that seemed as lost and out of place as the human fugitives on these high slopes and in almost as much danger of not surviving.

They huddled together in the meager shelter, watching the rain. Lita leaned back against a knobby trunk and closed her eyes; after a while, her regular breathing told him she slept. He needed sleep too, but the constant itch of his craving for *zyth* prevented him from finding it.

Jilan seemed unable to sleep. He studied her. There was nothing dull or retarded about the eyes that gazed back at him, and he knew she wasn't deaf. Then why didn't she talk like a normal three-year-old? He seemed to remember hearing her exploring pre-speech sounds like all human

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children, trying out the full range available before settling on the ones selected by the language that would become their native tongue and forgetting how to make the others. But she hadn't progressed to the next stage.

"Baby," he said softly, so as not to wake Lita. "Talk to me. Say 'Ries. Hello, Ries.'"

He sounded ridiculous to himself. It gave him a sudden respect for mothers everywhere who provided models for their children to learn language from. The little girl stared at her hands in her lap.

"Try 'Hello Lita.'"

Nothing. He pondered for a moment, made another decision.

"*Taq'na,*" he said. Food, in Frehti.

Her dark eyes flicked briefly over him. Not much, but more reaction than he'd got for Inglis. Encouraged, he tried again.

"*Yati.* How about that one? *Yati.* Mama."

She blinked at him and he feared for a moment she was going to cry. Idiot! he thought. Why bring up bad memories? But she'd obviously grown bored already; she began to trace patterns in the mud with her fingers. Not surprising that she reacted to Frehti, he decided. She'd probably had more interaction with her alien amahs than she'd had with her parents.

His musings were interrupted by a bout of sneezing. His nose was constantly on fire with invading spores. The DepCom's daughters didn't seem to be as bothered by the phenomenon; Lita sneezed occasionally and rubbed her eyes, Jilan's nose was runny, but neither one was seriously affected. His immune system was challenged more than theirs. The AI had warned about *zyth* addiction's side effects, but he hadn't paid attention, at first arrogantly certain none of it was ever going to happen to him. And later, not caring.

After a while, Lita woke up, and they continued their journey. Along the way, he kept his gaze on the ground, searching for signs of the nutritious tuber that would solve one of their problems, not daring to venture far off the path he'd set for fear of getting them further lost. He didn't find any.

Their second night out, he had better luck and found a sheltered place between a jumble of huge boulders where he could light a small fire to dry their clothes. That night he also found the last of the edible berries for their supper, but not enough for all three. Even with his share added to

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hers, the child whimpered from hunger, her face wan and pinched with distress.

It wasn't hunger that sent the spasm through his body, and it took all his willpower not to put one of the poison berries under his tongue. *Just one — How could one hurt? — You'd feel so much better* — the seductive voice inside his head pleaded and cajoled. *You could handle one.*

His hands shook so badly as he handed Lita her share of the berries that she noticed.

"It's *zyth*, isn't it? You need some."

He sat down on the other side of the fire from her. "Who told you that?"

"Mama said you were an incurable drunkard. She said it was a scandal the Guild sent you to us."

"A lot of things your mother never understood."

"She said it was good we didn't have to pay the Guild too much for your services because you were squandering all your share in the native taverns."

"None of her business what I did with my money."

"My father always defended you when they argued, did you know that?"

He felt too sick to be angry. "I don't want to hear any more. Get some rest."

"Well, don't go and die on us during the night, will you?"

She lay down and covered herself and her sister with his jacket and was soon sleeping soundly. He stared at the little fire till the flames flickered out. It took him a long time before anger and need both subsided, allowing him to fall asleep for a little while too.

The third night, they were not so lucky. After a long, exhausting day when at times he despaired of finding a way around the huge boulders in their path while the child cried constantly from hunger, they camped out on stony ground on a windswept ridge where even the thorny bushes couldn't take hold. The rain held off when the sun went down, but it was bitterly cold and he found nothing to burn.

For a long time after Jilan had closed her eyes, he heard the soft muffled sound of Lita weeping. After the girl finally fell asleep, he sat stiffly beside them, every muscle in his body aching from physical

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exertion, his nerves vibrating with a desperate craving for *zyth* that wouldn't let him sleep.

It was time he faced the truth. He didn't know these mountains. He had no clear idea where he was going. He was incapable of looking after himself; how could he hope to take care of these two children? Only a fool would take seriously native superstitions about "souls" and "Mothers" who might or might not exist. How could they help him even if they did? He'd made a bad decision. They should've tried to get across the river to the base. There was no way they would survive this ordeal, and just as he felt he'd been indirectly responsible for Yv's death, he would now be to blame for the death of the DepCom's children.

He pulled Born-Bent's bone out of his pocket and peered at the symbol carved on it. Disgusted, he flipped the bone into the darkness. He heard it glance off a rock.

Then he lay down, and immediately distinguished the uncomfortable lump of the fieldpack from the sharp stones digging into his ribs. Even now, he couldn't violate his training and throw the thing away. He hadn't thought so much about the Guild in years, and now he could hardly get it out of his mind. It rode on his heartbeat and slid through his veins; he was as addicted to the Guild as he was to *zyth*. He couldn't lift his hands without its laws springing up in his path. He had never hated the Guild so fiercely nor needed it so much.

He shifted the pack so it wasn't directly beneath him, and closed his eyes. At once, all the useless, stupid, shameful scenes out of his past sprang vividly to his mind. The opportunities the Guild had given him that he'd wasted, his constant failure to live up to the lingster code, the way he'd ultimately betrayed Yv, he relived them all. Dark thoughts skittered through his brain, tormenting him late into the night.

He came suddenly awake just before sunup, conscious of someone bending over him. His skin crawled as he forced himself to bear the silent scrutiny without flinching. Whoever it was could've killed him as he slept but hadn't. Beside him, he could feel Jilan's small body, wedged between him and her sister for warmth. Both girls were still sleeping.

He heard a sudden intake of breath above him. Cautiously, he slitted his eyes and looked up.

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A pudgy, adult male Freh knelt over him, layered in the familiar ankle-length, orange-brown cloth. The Freh's head was turned, tilted as if he were listening to some sound coming from the direction of the jagged peaks that loomed white as snow this morning in cold pre-dawn light, looking more like the fangs of a beast than bones.

Then the alien became aware the human was awake, and his head swiveled back in alarm. Ries stared at him. One half of the Freh's face was covered with an ugly red blotch that spread from just below the hairline to well below the chin. The nose was twisted and warped off-center, a defect that pulled one eye down with it and trapped the nictitating membrane halfway over the eyeball.

The Freh scrambled to his feet, keening anxiously. Something slipped out of his fingers. Ries sat up. Now he could see that behind the male there was a female gesturing to him.

"What do you want?" he said in Frehti.

At the sound of his voice, Lita woke up. She took one look at the Freh and shrieked. The Freh stumbled away in obvious panic. The female clutched his arm and hobbled beside him, half pulling her companion, half being dragged along by him.

"Devi!" Lita said. "I've never seen such an ugly one."

The native was another sport, only the second he'd seen.

The child was awake and whimpering now. Lita stooped and picked her sister up. "Are we just going to let them get away?"

The two Freh were scrambling awkwardly up a rocky incline toward the nearest peak. He watched their awkward progress; they seemed to know where they were going. And if they could do it, so could humans.

"No. We're going to follow them."

"Jilan can't go much further without food."

As he bent down to retrieve the sitar, something caught his eye. The bone lay out in the open where the alien had dropped it. He picked it up; a crack obliterated part of the markings. He dropped it back in his pocket.

Lita took two shuffling steps forward with her sister perched on one hip. The girl's exhaustion was apparent in the slump of her shoulders, her pinched expression. He caught up with her and took Jilan from her.

"I'll carry my father's sitar," Lita said.

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They stumbled forward silently for a while, no energy left over for talk, while the land rose inexorably beneath their feet.

The rising sun brought no warmth, and the dazzle it struck from the bare peaks hurt his eyes. At least it had stopped raining, and his nose seemed a little less sore. Lita had shut her eyes against the fierce light and walked blindly, clinging to his arm. He squinted through lowered eyelids, his vision narrowed down to the point where he felt as if he were sleepwalking. With his free hand, he adjusted the way the fieldpack rode at his waist. One good thing had come from so much exercise and so little food: his belt fit looser now than it had a few days ago.

Yet in spite of his exhaustion and the pressing need for food, he felt better in spirit than he had in a long time. Miraculously, his mind was clear and pure as spring water this morning. The self-hatred of the night before seemed to have burned away; possibilities spun in the bright air like butterflies in the apple orchards at the Mother House. He looked deep into his being and found it miraculously free of the demon that had bound him for so long. He took a deep breath. He might not have a coherent plan for their survival, but for the first time since Chandra Patel's murder he knew hope.

It was such a ludicrous emotion under the circumstances that he laughed aloud. In the thin air of this high altitude, the laughter soon turned to gasping for breath.

"Come not nearer."

The Frehti words cut short his amusement. Shielding his eyes against the sun with one hand, he peered at the small, bent figure of an old Freh female standing directly in his path.

His heart jumped with the realization: an *old* female.

She wore a long, shapeless brown garment of some coarse, woven material, the hood thrown back from her lined face revealing thin, graying fur on her head. She was holding a three-edged Freh knife ready to strike, reminding him powerfully of Patel's assassins. Belatedly, he set Jilan down, pushing her and Lita behind him.

"Name yourself," the old female said. "Tell what you seek here."

"I am Ries Danyo. I seek the Mothers."

"You have found. I am called First-Among-Mothers."

The word she used was *Na-freh'm-ya*, and he heard a common root in it, but she didn't give him time to think about it. She gestured with one

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clawlike hand, and they were suddenly surrounded by three more hooded figures who had come up on his blind side where they'd been hidden in sun dazzle. All three carried the vicious-looking triple-edged knives.

Before he could react, the little girl was taken from his grasp. Seeing one of the hooded figures lifting her sister, Lita yelled and kicked at her own captors. Ries's arms were seized and rapidly bound to his sides; his nose filled with the powdery scent he associated with old age, and something danker, an underground smell that clung to their robes.

Every one of their captors, he saw, was bent, wrinkled, gray-furred, skinny-necked, and female. It would've been funny, he thought, a gang of old alien females struggling uphill with a furious human teenager and a wailing human child, if he could've been sure they wouldn't resort to using those knives.

First-Among-Mothers held up one hand, cutting off Lita's noisy protest. "Little one safer here than Danyo."

"Why is Danyo not safe with the Mothers?" he asked.

She stopped abruptly in his path and he almost fell. One of the other females yanked his bonds, pulling him upright. First-Among-Mothers's face was an arm's length away from his. In spite of the situation, he was fascinated by this close view.

There was nothing here of the blandness that had marked every Freh's features he'd seen until now, yet she was no sport. The round, amber eyes, curdled with age till they resembled milky opals, held a depth of intelligence that was unmistakable. He read anger in them, but also a touch of humor in the lines at their edges as if she laughed at herself for a role she was playing. Something in her expression seemed to say this was all an elaborate joke. The effect was so human that he felt convinced he could read her basic goodwill. It was almost impossible not to anthropomorphize and think of her as an old woman.

He knew instantly to distrust his naive reaction. He'd forgotten a lot of the Guild's teachings over the years, and disobeyed more, but this stayed in his mind: The closer to human an alien appeared, the more difficult it was for a human to read its intentions.

"Danyo male," First-Among-Mothers said.

"But Danyo not Freh," he countered.

She considered this for a moment. "No trust here."

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At that, they all resumed their uphill journey. The old Freh females urged the humans to hurry with kicks and slaps and the occasional warning prick from the tip of a knife, though he noticed that they were easier on Lita than they were on him.

He felt like Gulliver captured by the Lilliputians.

IT WAS PAST NOON when the party halted in the shadow of the broken peak he'd used as a bearing.

"In," First-Among-Mothers said.

The females escorting Lita and Jilan went ahead through a narrow opening in the rock. He did as he was told, and found himself at the top of a flight of steps carved into rock walls. Torchlight made shadows leap on the walls.

"Down."

He went down.

The steps opened up into a cavern, broad and high-ceilinged, with rough-hewn pillars supporting balconies that overhung shadowy side aisles. The stone floor was covered with a layer of rushes, and plainly woven hangings gave privacy to different areas. While it was still cool down here, it was several degrees warmer than the air outside, for which he was grateful. But he was mostly struck by its resemblance to the monastic design of the refectory, the oldest building of the Guild's Mother House. The cavern lacked only modern means of lighting and windows to look out on high mountains rather than be buried beneath them as here. A long wooden table down the center completed the resemblance.

Old females sat together on stone benches in groups of two or three, all wearing the same kind of homespun robes. The scene was almost reassuring in its domesticity, until he noticed the glitter of a knife tucked in one old crone's belt.

They were stared at with a good deal of open-mouthed curiosity, but unlike just about every Freh he'd ever come in contact with, these old females didn't grin in the presence of humans. It was always an odd sensation to be stared at as a human on an alien world, one he'd had many times but never managed to get used to. Suddenly, when he least expected it, the tables would be turned and he'd perceive himself as the alien in the crowd, the man far from home.

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From somewhere in the vast cave came the aroma of food being prepared. The smell made his knees buckle with hunger. Now he was pushed back against one of the columns. He resisted and a female slapped him across the mouth, making him taste blood. His thighs encountered a hard edge, and he slumped awkwardly onto a narrow stone bench while one of the aliens secured his arms to the column.

He was suddenly aware of how filthy and repulsive he must seem, more like a wildman than the neatly dressed colonists of New Bombay with their emphasis on hygiene. He could smell his own sweat, sour from days of not bathing.

Across the way, he saw Lita and Jilan seated at a long wooden table where First-Among-Mothers sat with them. There seemed to be no menace in the alien's actions toward the girls. He tested the bonds; they were flimsy enough that he could burst free if he had to, but he saw only one exit from the cave that would lead up to the ground, the one they'd come down.

Soon other females appeared carrying large pots made from gourds like the one Born-Bent had used to mend the DepCom's sitar; they began ladling the contents out into clay bowls to serve the girls. He, apparently, was not going to be given food.

As if she sensed his thought, Lita turned and glanced at him. "Danyo hungers too," she said in very clear Frehti.

First-Among-Mothers leaned forward and gazed at Lita. "No male eats here but the kipiq."

She used a word Ries had never heard before. In spite of his stomach's protests and the presence of danger, he was excited. He felt an adrenaline rush at the unfolding revelation of mystery. While the form of Frehti First-Among-Mothers used ranged from the simpler, chirping utterances of males in the marketplace to more complex constructions, he knew that no lingster encountering it would question the high sentience quotient of the speaker. He had difficulty following it at times, accustomed as he was to the male form of the language.

And he understood now why those first lingsters had been so mistaken in their judgment: They'd forged interface with the wrong sex.

"Danyo is a..." Lita struggled but didn't find a word for it in Frehti. "...a *lingster*."

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Lightheaded from hunger, he almost laughed, remembering an old student joke: *What comes in two sexes but has no sex life? A lingster.*

First-Among-Mothers glanced at him. "The tale arrives before the male. A vragim comes from Sorrow-Crossing and speaks our words."

"I am vragim too," Lita said, jutting her chin stubbornly.

It surprised him to find the girl arguing in his defense. There were a lot of things about her that he still didn't understand. Her handling of Frehti was one; the DepCom's daughter used the new word as confidently as if she'd always known what it meant.

First-Among-Mothers got up and came over to him.

"Vragim. *Lingster,*" she said. If she'd been human he would've read contempt in her tone, but he must resist making connections that might not be there at all. "And do you know how the words make, as the tale is told to me?"

He blinked, hearing Born-Bent's voice in memory, "You understand how words make." He jumped suddenly between the known and the hidden, the leap of faith every lingster performed at some point, the lucky guess that was also one of humankind's most basic tools for learning language.

"I bring the kipiq's soul home for the Mothers to make words with," he said.

The effect in the stone cavern was electrifying. Every Mother set down her work or her food and stared. Others crowded in from rooms off the main hall till there were at least forty old Freh females gaping at him, round-eyed as owls. A long silence followed, broken only by the clatter of the child's bowl; Jilan seemed the only one in the cavern not affected by his words.

He closed his eyes for a second against his body's weakness, seeking strength to prevail in the battle of wills he sensed had been set in motion.

First-Among-Mothers held out her hand, palm up, and he was startled by her look of almost desperate desire.

"Give."

"No."

She thought about that for a moment, then turned and snapped her fingers. A bent figure hobbled quickly forward and undid the bonds holding his arms. Another followed with a bowl full of the thick stew.

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So she thought she was going to bribe him with food?

His stomach insisted it was a fine idea.

First-Among-Mothers waited while he wolfed the contents down without tasting. A second bowl appeared, and he devoured that too, barely noticing how rich and spicy it was this time. When the third bowlful arrived, he was able to eat with a semblance of manners that would've been acceptable in the Guild's refectory.

First-Among-Mothers gestured to the gathered females and they moved silently away. He saw one old alien carrying Jilan, and Lita following them. The main cavern emptied slowly out.

"Now," First-Among-Mothers said. "We make the words together."

He followed her through a low arch at the far end of the big cavern, and came to a smaller cave. The light was dimmer here, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. When they did, he saw the Mothers waiting silently in a circle. His breath caught in his chest.

The old aliens had stripped off and discarded their shapeless robes. The flickering light of wax tapers glowed on naked flanks and fleshless rumps, touching with silver the gray fur on their heads, sliding past bony shoulders and spilling over flat, shriveled breasts. One emaciated female turned her back to him, and he saw clearly knobs of vertebrae and sharp blades of bone outlined under the skin that he identified as ribs, though they didn't appear to be assembled in the human plan. Although Freh females' faces were never tattooed, decoration covered their trunks and all four limbs in scrolls, swirls, leaves, and vines. Primitive, by the standards of high civilizations in the Arm, but full of energy and power, the tattoos were dark purple, the color of *zyth* berries.

He'd never seen a roomful of nude women, let alone old women — it was next to impossible not to think of them as women; they seemed more human unclothed, as if spirit was more important than species — but he felt no awkwardness. They wore their years with dignity and a kind of patient beauty, he thought, like a ring of wise elder goddesses.

Now First-Among-Mothers also dropped her garments on the floor, kicking them impatiently against the cave wall. Nakedness seemed to make her grow taller than the others, her body straighter than theirs though no less slack and wrinkled, her gray head fur still partly dark. Like

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the others, her body was covered in intricate purple designs. The circle opened to let her through.

She walked slowly clockwise inside the ring which began to move counterclockwise around her. There was something on the ground inside the ring, a center that First-Among-Mothers was circling, an irregularly shaped mosaic formed by small bones, all about the same width and length as the one Born-Bent had entrusted to him. To one side, there were several haphazard, smaller piles. There must've been well over two hundred bones in the pattern, but it looked unfinished, with many spaces and gaps interrupting whatever design was in the process of being formed.

Some kind of religious ceremony, he guessed, watching her circling slowly, her bare feet marking an intricate rhythm on the stone floor. Then she stopped, caught up a bone from the pattern, raised her arms and began to gesture. Her hands caught the tapers' light, sweeping in a broad arc above her head. She seemed to be inscribing some kind of ephemeral calligraphy on the air. As she did so, she opened her mouth and sang one note. Now all the Mothers followed her lead, performing the looping arm movements, the singing tone in unison.

First-Among-Mothers repeated this with each of the bones in turn, marking each with a different sound. Then, after a long while, the group fell silent, the outer circle opened again, and the malformed male Freh who'd stood over Ries on the mountain appeared. The kipiq, who was naked too, entered the circle humbly, shuffling forward over the stone floor on bare knees and holding one hand high above his head. In it, Ries saw another small bone like the one in his pocket.

Now a low, animal hum broke the silence, rising quickly in pitch and volume. The sound became almost deafening in the confined space, then stopped abruptly as the kipiq reached the center of the ring. He took his time choosing a place to set the bone he carried. In the silence, First-Among-Mothers squatted to see it. The kipiq remained on his knees, head bowed.

She examined the bone, holding it close, turning it, shifting its position, exchanging it with others. At times she seemed to change her mind and returned a bone to its original position, removing another that had now apparently become less desirable and tossing it on the outer piles. Whatever these decisions meant, Ries sensed they were of the utmost

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importance to the assembled Freh. At last she put a hand on the kipiq's shoulder and the ring of Mothers gave a long drawn-out sigh.

First-Among-Mothers turned, and Ries could see her owl eyes glowing in the light from the nearest taper. She held up the kipiq's bone. Now he saw it had marks scratched on it, like the one in his pocket. Then, accompanied by another elaborate hand movement above her head, she sang out a clear, distinct syllable. As she did so, the Mothers followed her arm movements and repeated the sound after her like children performing rote learning. It reminded him suddenly of how, hundreds of years ago on Earth, Chinese children had learned by tracing the characters of their language on the air.

The revelation of what she was doing stunned him. First-Among-Mothers was reading the bones.

But these couldn't be complete words, he realized in a great rush of comprehension, not even morphemes, the smallest units of meaning. The Freh had no written language. She was taking the first step, inventing a system of codifying the phonemes, the individual units of sound. From the gathered bones at her feet, she was choosing the best symbols to begin writing her language.

It was obvious from what he'd observed that not just any shape on a bone would do. Creating a written language was a sacred job, not one to be completed hastily. *Through me flows the meaning of the universe;* he thought First-Among-Mothers would understand the Guild's philosophy very well.

Runes, hieroglyphs, logograms, ideograms, pictograms, alphabets, humans had tried them all through long millennia of experimentation. The Guild taught lingsters in a few years what had taken centuries to unlock, the secrets of these scripts. All but the main one: how they had come into being in the first place. He'd always wondered what accidents of chance and intelligence had caused early humans to take the first step, associating sounds with symbols, then developing them into script. And from that to go on to write laws and poems, shopping lists and equations that guided starships across the darkness of space to a world that still stood on the threshold.

The Guild itself with all its research hadn't been able to answer that question, not even for one Terran language. A great wave of exhilaration

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washed over him. He was witnessing an alien race set out on that mysterious journey. Yet he could also see First-Among-Mothers had a long way to go before the symbols she was collecting were usable.

After a while, she fell silent. The kipiq shuffled back out of the circle into the shadows at the edge of the cave. Ries was aware of her gaze on him now.

It was his turn. The bone containing the symbol Born-Bent found so vital he called it his "soul" must be added to the collection growing at the feet of First-Among-Mothers. The ring of old females gazed at him, waiting patiently. But even in his excited state, a sense of human pride restrained him. He was not going to remove his clothes, nor would he enter the circle on his knees. If the Mothers wanted Born-Bent's soul, they would have to take it his way or not at all.

Conscious of the weight of a shared destiny, human and Freh, he walked solemnly forward in the silence and leaned down, placing the bone in a vacant space.

First-Among-Mothers squatted, peering at the bone as she had done before. Now she reached for it, squinting in the glimmering light. For a long time she studied the symbol scratched there. Then her hand dropped slowly to her side. She stood and faced Ries, her expression bleak.

"Broken," First-Among-Mothers said. "The soul is gone."

Around the ring, old Mothers began to wail.

IV

"Think about the waste," Lita said to him. "The tragedy, as the Mothers see it."

The girl had been his only visitor since a group of females had dragged him off to a small niche in a corridor off the main cavern and barred the entrance with a strong lattice of wooden branches lashed with vines. The alcove had probably been a vegetable storage area, he guessed from the lingering smells.

Lita passed a cup of water through the lattice gate and he took a sip. In her other hand she held a slim taper that made deep shadows jump in his cell. He felt exhausted; all emotion and energy had been sucked out of him.

It was hard to estimate the passage of time in this darkness, but he

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guessed a day had passed since First-Among-Mother's ceremonial reading of the symbols on the bones. While he'd been stuck here, contemplating the consequences of one moment of bad temper, Lita had apparently been deep in conversation with First-Among-Mothers.

Her ability shouldn't have been surprising. She'd been about eight or nine when the family came to Krishna, an age when children still learned languages with some ease, and she must've been exposed to the more complex forms used by the house servants who were largely female. She'd just never let him see evidence of it.

"Freh males don't contribute to the work. Except the kipiq, of course, and not too many of them make it to adulthood."

"I imagine not," he agreed, thinking of the day he and the DepCom had encountered Born-Bent in the bazaar. In his experience of cultures of the Arm including early human, such deformities had usually signaled a short life for the child born with them.

"Do you understand how serious this is, Danyo?" Her face in half-shadow, she looked as if she were thinking about leaving him alone again. "The race doesn't use language like humans. Freh males have a very simple version. Sort of like Kitchen Frehti. Without the Inglis words, of course."

He had the absurd fantasy he was back at the Mother House taking an exam about pidgins and creoles. "It's uncommon to find such a wide division in ability between the sexes."

"The females are *much* better at it! But the big thing is, up here, year after year for a long time, the Mothers've been working on finding a way to get the language written down."

"You've learned an impressive amount in such a short time."

"Well," she said, softening her tone a little, "I might've missed a few things. I'm not really perfect in Frehti yet. Anyway, every Mother who manages to come up here contributes something. And the one who is 'First-Among-Mothers' puts it all together."

"Why are symbols from the sports so important?"

"The *kipiq*," she corrected, "are male. First-Among-Mothers says the language must balance between male and female or the race will eventually destroy itself. But regular males don't use language well, and kipiqs usually don't survive to be adults, so they don't get very many male symbols. So when the one you brought was broken, they were upset."

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It was as if he could hear First-Among-Mother's words echoing through Lita's, and he had the sense that the Freh meant something he couldn't fathom yet.

"The Mothers believe if they can write the language down, they'll have a chance to prevent something bad from happening. Do you understand, Danyo? Can you follow this?"

"Does she say why there are no old males up here, only old females?"

The girl hesitated. "She said it was the — the — oh, a word I don't understand. *Sem yaj* — something."

"Sem yaji nuq," First-Among-Mothers said. She had come to stand in the shadows behind Lita.

"Tell me in other words, words I can understand," he said, switching to Frehti.

"Sem yaji nuq. No other words." She turned to Lita and said kindly, "The little one calls you."

Lita went away, taking the taper with her. In the darkness, he was aware of First-Among-Mothers's soft breathing.

"No male comes here except the kipiq who brings his soul bone," she said. "Now I must kill you."

He was suddenly exasperated with her mysteries and evasions. "Explain the death of these children's father, and maybe I can help you speed up the work."

"You bargain with me?"

"Yes, I bargain with you."

She hesitated, thinking it over. Then she said, "He learned about sem yaji nuq."

"I do not understand those words! Use others."

"I have not your skill."

"You accepted my bargain."

Her voice rose in anger. "He knew about Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over. You call them *Mules*, but that is your word, not ours."

He peered through darkness, wishing he could see her expression. Lingsters learned to use visual clues as well as aural ones to decipher meanings. "*Something I just learned...*" Patel had said. "What is this connection, so important a man must die for knowing it?"

"You have the answer you sought. Keep your word."

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If so, he thought, it was an answer he didn't understand, but he was apparently not going to get any further explanation at the moment.

"I have seen many worlds, First-Among-Mothers, spoken many languages. You are not the first people to wrestle with this problem."

She was silent for so long he began to think she'd gone away. Then she said, "In the market they call you Talker. But you cannot help with this."

"You have nothing to lose by letting me try."

He had the feeling she was reading his face, as if her milky old eyes could see in the dark. Then he heard her sigh.

"We have a saying, 'Bone defeats bone, but stone outlives.' I think perhaps you are stone."

"Let me look at the bones, First-Among-Mothers."

In the darkness, he heard her slice the vines holding the lattice with her knife.

HE SQUATTED on the stone floor, examining the bone pattern, while First-Among-Mothers held a taper so he could see. The air was thick and fragrant with the incense-smell of tapers, making his eyes heavy. He frowned, concentrating. Somewhere in the main cavern, he heard the sounds of the sitar: Lita picking out tunes to soothe her sister.

He stared at the symbols on the bones. The fine etching had been colored with a dark, rusty ink that might very well have been blood. He was aware of an almost religious quality to the moment. Spread out before him on the rough stone floor of the cave was the birth of a writing system, a script that could capture a language and its speakers' vision of their world. No modern human had ever witnessed such a moment.

Then he remembered Born-Bent's hand in its bloody bandage and he examined them more carefully. They were all a similar length and shape, and all of them had once been fingers, he was sure of it. The symbolism of the Mothers' task began with the medium on which it appeared. He was awed that these aliens — judged simple aborigines by the human colonists — cared so much about a project that many of them couldn't possibly even comprehend. He glanced up at First-Among-Mothers.

"Each Mother gives one," she said. "Except the First. She gives all before her death. One by one."

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She held up her hands for his inspection. Freh were four-fingered, three forward and a flexible fourth below the palm. He counted three fingers gone out of eight, two from the left hand and one from the right. An alphabet forged in blood, a ritual as demanding as interface and as dangerous, he thought, given the primitive state of medicine on this world. He wondered if he could've found the courage if it had been his ritual.

"The work has taken many, many years," she told him. "The shapes must be just right to hold the sounds that make up our language. Not every one that is given is accepted. It is the work of the First to choose."

She gestured with the taper, indicating he should continue. After a while, she squatted beside him and gazed at the bones as if she too was seeing them for the first time. Forgotten, the taper dripped wax on the floor.

Some of the symbols he examined were carefully and lovingly inscribed; others resembled the first scratchings of a child. Champollion seeing an Egyptian cartouche for the first time might have felt lightheaded like this, he thought, and Niebuhr copying cuneiform inscriptions may have caught his breath in just the same manner as connections became clear. Ries Danyo, drunkard and failed Guild lingster, was becoming part of the galaxy's history.

Many of the finger bones carried obvious pictograms, tiny exquisite glyphs that were suggestive even at first glance of objects from the world of the writers, though he knew better than to suppose the picture necessarily gave the meaning of the sign any more than it had in Egyptian hieroglyphs. Others bore what were apparently semantic symbols, abstract representations of the sounds of Frehti, and these delicately carved logograms had an austere beauty of their own.

Mixed systems were not unprecedented; Earth had seen several, most notably the Egyptian and Mayan scripts. He wasn't particularly surprised to find one evolving here. But eventually all the languages of Earth had found it more convenient to adopt alphabets. The first problem was not the mix of symbols for sounds and glyphs for whole words, but that there were still far too many choices here at present. Some would need to be eliminated.

First-Among-Mothers touched his shoulder. "I will tell the sound of each one."

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Then she began essentially to repeat the ceremony he'd witnessed earlier. One by one she picked up the bones and pronounced the sound that went with it, but where earlier she had sung these phonemes as part of a venerable ceremony with the assembled Mothers, now she was content just to vocalize.

Almost immediately he realized the impossibility of working this way. It was like trying to catch one drop out of a stream of water. He didn't have the stamina to sustain this concentration for very long. He needed to impose some kind of order.

Not for the first time since he'd fled New Bombay he thought with regret of the AI left behind. Sorting and identifying so many alien signs without help was a daunting task. But there'd been translators and interpreters long before there'd been lingsters, before computers too; those early pioneers had worked under primitive conditions.

"I need wet clay. And something to mark with, like a cloth merchant keeping tally."

First-Among-Mothers made no reply to the request, and he wondered if the idea of reducing her exalted goal to humble clay seemed like sacrilege to her. If so, she'd have to get used to it; humanity's profoundest laws had first been scratched in clay. She set the taper on the floor and clapped her hands. A moment later, a figure appeared in the cave's low archway. First-Among-Mothers said something in rapid Frehti and the Mother withdrew. They waited in silence.

After a while, the Mother came back with a lump of clay the size of his fist, clammy from the storage bin. He took it and flattened it out, stretching it into a tablet he could use to make a syllabic grid to plot the signs of written Frehti.

The work progressed slowly over a number of hours; he lost track how many. Twice, First-Among-Mothers sent for more tapers and refreshment. He drank water gratefully, and splashed some on his face to ward off drowsiness, but in spite of his recent hunger he couldn't eat. Gradually, he familiarized himself with the symbols so that similarities and repetitions began to appear, and together they weeded the redundancies out. Over and over again, she patiently repeated the sounds that accompanied glyphs and logograms. It was tedious work.

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"It goes too slowly," First-Among-Mothers commented.

She was right. It was an enormous task and would take days at this rate, possibly weeks. The early scholars on Earth had spent years unraveling the secrets of cuneiform or Linear B; if he didn't want to spend that much time here in this cave he needed to find some way to speed things up.

In his fieldpack there was a way.

He touched it now, still safe on his belt; since he'd arrived on Krishna, there'd been no occasion to use it. In it, there were two sequences of drugs that lingsters used in interface. The alpha sequence consisted basically of sophisticated neurotransmitters that increased alertness and enhanced the lingster's ability to work at high speed, especially at such routine tasks as analyzing, cataloging and memorizing. He'd used them many times on other worlds, always when working with an AI that also monitored the dosage; he knew how effective the alpha sequence could be.

That had all been a long time ago, before he'd begun poisoning himself with *zyth*. No way of telling if there'd be a drug interaction, or how severe. He hadn't had any of the Krishnan liquor for several days; perhaps that would lessen the danger. And if not? "*Another time,*" Magister Kai's voice said in his memory, "*you may not be so lucky.*" In all his career, he'd done very little to make the Guild proud of him, and much he was ashamed of. This was a risk he had to take.

"I can make it go faster," he said.

He took out the rack of small plastivials and thought about the pills they contained. First-Among-Mothers gazed steadily at him, her round eyes luminous as a nocturnal animal's in the taper-light. She'd asked no questions since he'd begun studying the bones, even when he disturbed the careful way she'd laid them out, accepting that whatever he did, it would advance her work. He hoped he could reward her faith.

He shook two small brown ovals onto the palm of his hand, then swallowed them. Within seconds, he felt the sudden jolt of the alpha drugs streaming through his veins. Thoughts sped through his brain too fast for words to catch them; his vision sharpened till microscopic details sprang into vivid display, and he could see individual hairs on First-Among-Mothers's head even in this dim light, the wrinkles on her face like the paths of long-dry rivers.

Something else, too, something different this time, something flickering

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at the back of his mind, disappearing when he turned his attention to it. Then it vanished in a great rush of endorphins that lifted and tossed him like a cork.

The work went faster. Connections seemed suddenly illuminated for his recognition, correspondences jumped out at him, were considered, and First-Among-Mothers indicated her choices which he then recorded. A workable Frehti alphabet began to emerge on the clay tablet.

"One sound is missing."

His nerves jumped at the sound of her voice. Absorbed by the work, he'd lost awareness of his surroundings and again he was confused by the passage of time. Disoriented, he gazed at the last of the tapers burning low, flickering in the draft she caused as she stood up from the work. He squinted through the wavering light at the neat chart he'd inscribed on the clay tablet, sixty-seven symbols that best represented the consonants, vowels, and diphthongs of First-Among-Mothers's language, chosen from the drawings on the assembled bones.

"A small sound," she continued dreamily. "Not often used. But the very highest of all. I have waited a long time to find its symbol."

"What sound is that, First-Among-Mothers?"

In answer, she formed a small O with her mouth and allowed breath to come sighing through; he could see her curled tongue almost touching her lips, shaping the sound. What emerged was a diphthong with an initial labial, a singing tone as if it came from a flute. She repeated it for him twice more.

A small scuffling noise behind them drew First-Among-Mothers's attention and she fell silent.

"I — I am sorry, First-Among-Mothers," Lita said nervously in Frehti from the shadows in the archway. "My sister wandered off — and I just found her. I will take her away."

"Do so."

For the first time, he wondered what First-Among-Mothers's life was like before she came up here to live beneath the Maker's Bones. Had she worked in the bazaar for a cloth-merchant mate, or had she cleaned and cooked in a human residence? Had she borne children, and were any of them male, and if so, did she ever think of what had become of them?

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First-Among-Mothers waited until the sounds of the children faded. Then she inclined her head toward the small pile of bones remaining on the stone floor, urging him back to work.

He glanced at them, seeing only duplications of symbols that had already been assigned or obvious clumsily drawn discards. There was no sign left over that could correspond to the new sound she'd just made.

She raised a hand and he was aware of the missing fingers. "A holy sound. Not one Talker hears in the market. It is Wiu, The White Bird. You will not find its sign there among the ordinary ones. It is a male sound, and a kipiq should give it shape. Now, Talker-from-Sorrow Crossing must replace the kipiq's soul that he lost."

The high mood of the alpha sequence deserted him as fast as it had come on. Cataloging the symbols on the bones with her help was one thing; that was no different from the regular duties lingsters often performed for their employers. Deliberately adding a human element to an emerging alien alphabet was another.

It was such a temptingly simple thing she asked of him: one sign, just one, from all the possibilities he'd encountered in human history, or from any of the worlds along the Arm for that matter. But even that little gift would be interference from one culture in another's development, and even minor interference was strictly forbidden. Nothing good ever came from violating this rule, however much the people of the less advanced culture wanted it. Like all lingsters, he'd sworn an oath to respect that prime prohibition.

"I cannot do it," he said. "I am sorry."

"Why can you not?"

"I cannot give you a sign that has its roots on the other side of Sorrow-Crossing. Nothing good would come from such a gift."

"I wish the work completed before my death, Talker," she said, her voice as calm as if she discussed the price of a bolt of silk. "And I do not have much time. You will do it or you will die. I will give you one day's turning to decide."

Two Mothers had appeared as if they'd been waiting for her command, and taken him back to his alcove prison.

Alone in the darkness once again, exhausted, his thoughts drifted.

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First-Among-Mothers had posed a dilemma for him. To give her what she wanted he must violate his oath. Never in his life had he knowingly done anything big or small that would alter the natural destiny of any of the alien races he'd come in contact with. But to die for the sake of that oath now meant he must violate the promise he'd made Chandra Patel to protect his family. If he died, the girls had no hope of ever reaching the *Calcutta*'s base.

Which was more important, interference in a developing culture — such a tiny touch at that, just the one symbol — or the suffering and perhaps death of the DepCom's children? How would the Guild decide?

"Danyo."

He jumped at the sound of her voice. Without knowing the boundary, he'd drifted from thought to sleep. This time Lita hadn't brought water or a taper.

"Danyo, something's wrong with Jilan. She seems very hot and — "

"As you may have noticed, I'm a prisoner here."

"Devi! Why don't you just open the door and walk out?"

He heard the sound of the lattice gate opening.

"How stupid you are sometimes, Danyo. I could tell as soon as I touched it they hadn't lashed the lattice together again."

If First-Among-Mothers had allowed the opportunity for him to escape, then it was because she knew there was nowhere he could escape to, with or without Lita and her sister. The thought frustrated him; he didn't like being defeated by an old Freh female, even one so obviously intelligent.

"Now will you come and see Jilan?"

He felt Lita's impatient hand on his arm, tugging him through the open gate; he let her guide him through the darkness until light seeped into the corridor from the central cavern.

"I don't know what good I can do. I'm not a medic."

"Keep to the wall just to be safe. No sense letting them see you out here."

"Maybe the food didn't agree with her."

"She's been eating Freh food all her life. That's all the amahs ever made for her after they stopped wet-nursing her. She never touched what Mama and I ate. Do hurry up!"

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Jilan was sitting cross-legged on a wide stone bench cushioned in bright silk. Tapers burned in a sconce fixed to the cave wall above her head. In their yellow light, he saw colored clay beads strung on a thong, a crude doll made of wood and covered in fur, toys he'd seen Freh children play with under the stalls in the bazaar. Jilan was making marks with a cut reed on a small lump of clay the size of a cloth merchant's tally. By the uneven flamelight, he could see her pixie face looked flushed. He laid a hand on her cheek and felt how warm it was. Lita bent quickly to wipe saliva from the corner of her sister's mouth.

"I've been giving her water."

"Good."

"What else should we do?"

The child didn't look too sick to him.

Then he became aware Jilan was saying something, very softly, almost under her breath, over and over again. No, not saying, *singing* — But not that exactly either. He felt chilled. Possibility shivered up his spine, moved like the touch of a feather across his nerves. He knelt quickly on the pad beside the child, who immediately stopped vocalizing.

"Baby, say it again for me," he said. "Please?"

"What is it?" Lita asked.

Jilan stuck a thumb in the corner of her mouth and stared wide-eyed at him.

"Where's the sitar? Get it for me."

Lita scrambled away and was back a moment later with the instrument. He ran his fingers over the five melody strings, searching for the right notes that described the pitch values of Frehti: G sharp, A, B flat, B. Jilan seemed to be listening intently. Encouraged, he let his fingers wander among these four tones, the drone strings humming under the impromptu melody.

"What're you doing, Danyo?"

Jilan opened her mouth and sang a note.

Not B, he realized, somewhere in between B and C, a flattened C. The native nut altered the tones he produced, fitting the sounds of the language better than the original gourd. He quickly adjusted the tuning pegs to reflect the subtly different harmonics of the semitone. Now she gave shape to the sound. His hands shook as he realized what he was

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hearing, the diphthong First-Among-Mothers had pronounced for him: Wiu.

"Danyo?"

"Get First-Among-Mothers and meet me in the cave with the bones."

He hooked the sitar over his shoulder, grabbed up the clay block and the writing utensil in one hand, and tucked the child under the other arm. He felt her cheek burning against his as he ran back to the cave.

New tapers flickered in the small cave, eerily lighting the disturbed pattern he and First-Among-Mothers had left behind them. He set Jilan down on the stone floor. Silent again, she gazed up at him, her breathing heavy and quick.

"This won't take long, baby."

"*Children invent language,*" the Guild taught. Why not the alphabet too, or at least a small part of it? The child was as close to a pure source as he was likely to find. Her parents might've come from Earth, but she was born on Not-Here — the planet's alien name was suddenly more appropriate than the one the colonists had given it — and she'd never spoken a word of Inglis. It was a near-perfect compromise. As long as First-Among-Mothers accepted it.

"Have you changed your mind, Talker?"

The clouded eyes gleamed like mother-of-pearl in the taper light when he turned to face her. She stood very erect, almost as tall as Lita.

He chose his words with care. "I offer a compromise, First-Among-Mothers."

"No more bargaining. Only one solution. Make the sign to hold that last, holiest of sounds."

"I cannot give you the sign you desire. It is not my gift to give and would only bring you evil. Instead I offer a child from Sorrow-Crossing but born on Not-Here. A vragim from her mother's womb, but nourished with a Freh mother's milk. Let this child make the sign."

First-Among-Mothers gazed skeptically at him in silence.

"The symbol you want from me," he said gently, "would be male, but it would be alien to your world. What I offer now is better. Trust here."

He waited for several long moments more. She said nothing, but she didn't specifically forbid the attempt either. He took the sitar and plucked

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the flattened C with the nail of his right forefinger. The child gazed up at him, thumb in mouth. She was drooling again.

"Come on, baby," he coaxed. "Sing for me."

He plucked the note again. She removed the thumb from her mouth and copied the semitone the sitar sang.

He heard the smothered gasp of surprise from First-Among-Mothers, and as the note died away he sounded it again. The child gave voice to the diphthong a second time, and this time her small pure voice was joined by the old woman's larger, mellower one.

He laid his palm flat across the strings, cutting off the vibration. The child gazed up at him. He set the sitar down and held out the clay tablet to her.

"Draw the sound, Jilan," he said. "Draw *Wiu* here, in the clay."

She took the tablet and the stylus from him and stared at them for a moment, then began to draw. Apart from the child's labored breathing there was no sound at all in the cave. From time to time she smoothed over what she'd done and began again. Finally, she held the tablet up and tilted her head, examining it. Then she held it out, not to him, but to First-Among-Mothers.

Over the child's head, her sister shot him a startled look.

First-Among-Mothers squatted down and took the tablet reverently as if it were holy, peering at it in the dim light. She took her time.

Then, in a soft voice, she said, "I accept the last sign."

He let the breath he'd been holding come sighing out in a whoosh of relief. Leaning forward, he peered at the symbol the child had drawn. The clay tablet held the crude, stick figure of a bird. He discovered that where a moment before he'd been chilled, now he was sweating heavily.

First-Among-Mothers laid the tablet down and took the child's hand in both her own, closing her fingers over it. "But it must be written on bone."

Lita got the significance first. "You can't cut a finger off my sister's hand. I won't let you!"

She threw herself at First-Among-Mothers, almost knocking the Freh and the child over.

First-Among-Mothers didn't appear upset by the outburst; instead, she smiled at Ries over the angry girl's head, a terrifying rictus grin from

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that almost lipless mouth. Taking the child's hand had been an act of provocation, showing him who held the power here.

"A child's sign, a male's bone together complete the work." She released the child and stood swiftly. Her hand came up with the three-edged knife glittering in it.

His vision seemed clouded, splitting the light from the knife into a rainbow of fire that stung his eyeballs. The universe was full of wonder and beauty, the Guild taught, but it also held much that was painful and cruel. The first lesson Earth's earliest astronauts had learned hundreds of years ago was that space offered suffering as well as glory. *The faint of heart among you,* the Guild warned its young students, *should stay at home.*

It was a small sacrifice she asked of him, and far better him than the child. Humans had been given an extra finger, as if long ago Nature had foreseen this moment and the need for one of her children to help another. He would think of it as payment for the privilege of seeing what he'd seen of the birth of a written language. No other lingster could say that. His head ached with the burden of such knowledge.

"And in return, will you give us safe passage over the mountains?" he said.

"We will guide you to your people, Talker."

"To the starship's base?"

"To your people, yes."

"Take Jilan away now," he said to Lita.

"No, Danyo! We're staying right here with you."

First-Among-Mothers nodded as if their presence too was an acceptable part of the ritual. She held out her hand to him, and hesitantly he put his left hand in it. For the first time in days he thought how good a shot of *zyth* would be to steady his nerves.

She drew him down until both of them were on their knees on the floor in a circle of golden light. With one hand, she positioned his on the stone. The other raised the knife.

At the last moment, he found a center of calm within. He didn't flinch as the knife descended.

The weather was cold and clear as they crossed over the stony summit of the Maker's Bones. It was still two hours before dawn, and alien

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constellations blazed above them in a forever moonless sky. He stopped to gaze at the brilliant river of light that was the home galaxy, Sorrow-Crossing. Somehow the name seemed to fit better here, in the farthest reach of the Arm, than "Milky Way." Dark sky and high altitude combined to make a magnifying lens of the thin air; he squinted at the enormous treasure of stars spilled across black space, half convinced he could distinguish the one dim pinpoint of light from all the rest that was Earth's Sol.

Lita touched his arm and he started walking again. First-Among-Mothers had given them food for the journey, and she'd sent along two females who knew the mountain paths as guides. The group moved purposefully, not wasting breath on conversation. From time to time a creature chirruped sleepily from an unseen nest, fooled by their passage into thinking it was morning.

Gradually, the pageantry overhead faded, and a breeze came up followed by the first rays of Not-Here's star. Within the hour, the sun shone fiercely down on them; there was little heat in it yet, but he started to sweat again. The air had the clean, clear smell of sun-warmed stone, and it was mercifully free of spores, but he had difficulty breathing and stumbled often on the uneven ground.

Below them on one side of the ridge, the land swept down a hundred kilometers to the valley of Separation River and the alluvial plain where the human colony had been. The other side fell less steeply to the golden sweep of grassland and the starship base. From up here, the planet appeared suddenly new, as if he'd never seen it before, more exotic than his memory of its strangeness the first day he'd landed. Knowing some of its secrets made it more alien, not less.

He felt light-headed, an after-effect of the wound to his left hand that still throbbed, and the fact that he'd had no desire to eat much in the days that followed the reading of the bones. Lita scolded him for his lack of interest in food, but he was relieved to be free of both the promptings of hunger and the need for *zyth*.

First-Among-Mothers had bandaged the wound herself, stopping the blood by packing a native moss into the space left by his severed finger, then wrapping it securely in layers of silk. While he still lay on the bed where Jilan had played, he'd seen the Mothers reverently preparing a small

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cauldron of boiling water into which they'd added herbs to boil his flesh off the bone so the child's symbol could be inscribed properly on it; his head still rang with the sound of their chanting.

For a moment his mind teetered between past and present, then First-Among-Mothers's face rose up before him as she'd stood by his bed. "*I am well pleased with the work,*" she'd said. And he'd argued, "*But mysteries remain. Tell me why language belongs to Freh females but not Freh males.*" "*Have you forgotten what Freh means?*" She held up one of her remaining fingers. He'd never really thought about the literal meaning of a word he'd used so casually for two years. He guessed, "*One? First?*" Then he knew: Those-Who-Come-First.

The memory faded and he staggered against one of the Mothers. She grabbed his arm, steadying him, her old eyes peering into his as if assessing his ability to continue the journey. The two Freh females had caught their long skirts up over bony knees and wore animal skin boots laced above their ankles. The level of their energy surprised him; old as they seemed to be, they'd been taking turns carrying Jilan on their backs over the uneven ground.

But at that moment the child skipped beside them, gathering pebbles and flowers along the way, and chattering in Frehti like any three-year-old who'd been born on this world. Since that first sound uttered over the bones, she hadn't stopped babbling in First-Among-Mothers's language. As if a wall had been breached, he thought, allowing the child to express everything she'd saved up for just this moment. Yet it was just another irony of the human experience on this world that the child had found her native tongue at the very moment when she must leave the company of those who spoke it.

"Are you all right, Danyo?" Lita asked, coming alongside him. "We could rest for a few minutes."

He couldn't rest until he'd fulfilled his promise and brought the DepCom's daughters to the safety of the starship's base.

Lita's cool hand touched his forehead. "You're very hot."

He attempted a joke. "Teething. Like Jilan."

He remembered Lita visiting him soon after his donation — a word he could deal with without self-pity. She'd tried to distract him from the pain in his hand with gossip: The Mothers were busy practicing writing out the

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alphabet under First-Among-Mothers's direction; the girl had laughed, describing their first clumsy attempts. She also told him Jilan had cut a late molar and her fever had gone away.

"Let me look at your hand again. Maybe it's infected."

"Antibiotics at the base."

"Danyo," the girl said. "Stop trying to be such a hero all the time."

He stared at her, uncomprehending. She stalked off ahead down the rough path. The ferocious sun dazzled his eyes, and his head throbbed again.

"What has this to do with Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over?" he'd asked First-Among-Mothers. *"We are one and the same,"* she'd said, *"only you do not see it yet."*

He thought about her words now as he stood on the path, one hand pressed to his chest, catching his breath. Metamorphosis was not uncommon among species in the Orion Arm; humans had encountered it more frequently than they'd found sentience on the worlds they'd visited. Even on Earth, caterpillars turned into butterflies and tadpoles became frogs without anyone being too surprised. Why shouldn't a pudgy Freh transform into a gaunt Mule? And if it only happened to one sex, it would still be no stranger than a hundred other quirks and tricks of Mother Nature he'd seen elsewhere. Yet butterflies weren't prone to do violence on caterpillars.

"There is more to it than that," he'd argued, thinking of First-Among-Mothers's urgent need to write the language out. *"Some secrets remain hidden until their time comes,"* the old Freh had replied. *"And will you tell me then, First-Among-Mothers?" "If we both live, Talker."*

An hour later — Two hours? Three? He seemed to have lost the ability to keep track of time — the party stopped. They'd reached an overlook, the land falling perhaps two hundred meters straight down a cliff. Spirals of dust rose in the heat, and the view before him shimmered hazily as if it were underwater. A vast plain spread out before them, an enormous valley stretching like a lake of grass to a range of mountains on the misty horizon. Huge flocks of bright-skinned, featherless birds rose and fell over gold-green fields, and the sweet smell of the grasslands drifted up on the warm air.

Sweat started out on his forehead and neck, instantly evaporating,

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and he sneezed once. He squinted through watering eyes into brightness at the goal they'd struggled to reach for so long, the end of their journey.

"There," one of the Mothers said, pointing.

"The *Star of Calcutta*'s base. I see it!" Lita said.

"We go no further," the second Mother said.

"We can make it from here, can't we, Danyo?"

He nodded and wished he hadn't as the sparkling world spun around him. Drunk without *zyth*, he thought.

One Mother handed Lita the sitar she'd been carrying, the other gave her package of food to the girl.

"You are stone," one of them said to him, touching his head gently.

Stone was a much more humble position to aspire to than rock, he thought.

Then both of them started back up the path. He knew they were anxious to rejoin the frenzy of work going on in the cave, writing out the history of their race in order to preserve its memory. And perhaps put an end to violence in some manner he didn't understand. What excitement there'd be in the Mother House when this story got back to the Guild. He could almost see the Head — whoever it would be now — summoning the teachers and the senior students —

"You really are feverish," Lita said.

"I'll get you there. Don't worry."

She stared at him. "*You'll* get *us* there?"

For the next few minutes she was distracted by the antics of her little sister who scampered back and forth across the path, chasing small flying creatures into the thickets. He was able to direct all of his strength into putting one foot in front of the other instead of having to spend it on making conversation. For some reason, going downhill was more difficult and took concentration.

The gleaming white domes and communication towers of the starbase grew steadily bigger as they followed the zigzagging path, but the heat increased, slowing their progress so that the nearer they came to the valley floor the longer it seemed to be taking. It didn't seem to bother the two girls, but he found it harder and harder to lift his feet.

"No use," he said, after a while. "I can't go any further."

"We're almost there." Lita adjusted the sitar over her shoulder.

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"Look. Only about another hundred meters to the perimeter. I can see the gate and the guard house."

He slumped down awkwardly by the side of the path. Jilan came skipping back and gazed at him, a spray of crimson wildflowers in her fist. The small blooms were the color of the blood that spurted from his hand when First-Among-Mothers's knife descended. He put his bandaged hand up to support his head, which seemed to weigh more than he remembered.

The child opened her mouth and sang, "*Wiu*," a note as pure as a bird's.

"Please, get up," Lita said urgently. "I can't carry you."

"You go. I'll wait here."

"They'll be able to help you down there. You just need some good human pharmaceuticals..."

As she stared down at him, the hot breeze rising from below teased the coppery hair and brought its faint scent like woodsmoke to his nose, so that for a moment he had the illusion he was looking at Yv.

So long ago. He'd fallen in love with the way Yv's long hair lifted in the warm wind, the hair with its smoky perfume that bewitched him. He could see her clearly in memory, sitting in the shade of a tree when he'd first seen her, her arm around one of that world's younglings who was teaching her to name the flowers that surrounded them. Though he'd always been sharply aware of his alienness on each world he'd visited, Yv had always seemed at home.

Then he knew one question was answered: Yv would've wanted children. And he would've come to love them, too. It felt good just to sit here and think about his wife.

"There. I can see a guard." Lita stood on tiptoe and waved her arms excitedly. "Oh, he doesn't see us. But I'll go get him, and then somebody'll come back for you."

Jilan put her bouquet of wildflowers in his lap and their perfume was so rich it made his head spin. She danced away from him into the light, her slight figure shattering in a myriad diamond points that hurt his eyes to watch. She seemed more an elemental spirit of this world than a human child, and he recognized in that one scintillating moment that there were mysteries that were not given to him to understand.

"You'll be all right?" Lita asked. "It won't take very long."

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"Yes. Go."

She hesitated for a moment longer, then leaned down and kissed him quickly on the cheek. "When we get back to Earth, Ries," she said, "I'm going to become a lingster, like you."

He put his hand up to touch his cheek and found it wet with his own tears.

The DepCom's daughters ran down the path to the base, the DepCom's sitar bouncing on the older daughter's back. The running figures became smaller and smaller. Then a tall figure emerged from the gatehouse and hurried toward them. Ries watched till the radiance forced his eyes closed.

When he opened them again, his wife was standing in the wildflowers at the edge of the path, hair spilling like flame over her shoulders. She was wearing the sky-blue wedding dress.

Yv held out her arms to him, welcoming him home. ☙

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH will mark the first (but not, we hope, the only) appearance in this magazine of James P. Blaylock's fiction. Those of you who have never before encountered the distinctive fantasies of Mr. Blaylock—never explored the odd and poignant sensibility at work in such novels as *The Digging Leviathan*, *Homunculus*, or *All the Bells on Earth*—will have to take my word that "The Old Curiosity Shop" is a treat. The rest of you Blaylock fans are probably counting the days now for the next issue.

Our cover story takes us into the chill of the Arctic, and on a very strange journey indeed. "Home Time" by Ian MacLeod is one of the more interesting science fiction stories to come our way in a while, and we're glad to bring it your way.

Our old friend Kedrigern the sorcerer returns next month in a tale of royalty and mirrors (hmm, perhaps you can see where this is headed...). John Morressy's "Reflection and Insight" is just one witty Kedrigern story we plan to bring you in the year ahead.

You can also look forward to Dr. Benford's continuing analysis of the Greenhouse Effect next month, Rob Killheffer and Charles de Lint on books, and more great stories. And the attractions coming in the next few months include new tales from Rick Bowes, Rick Wilber, Albert Cowdrey, Mike Resnick, Esther Friesner, and Michael Swanwick. With all this great fiction lined up, now's not likely to be the winter of any reader's discontent.

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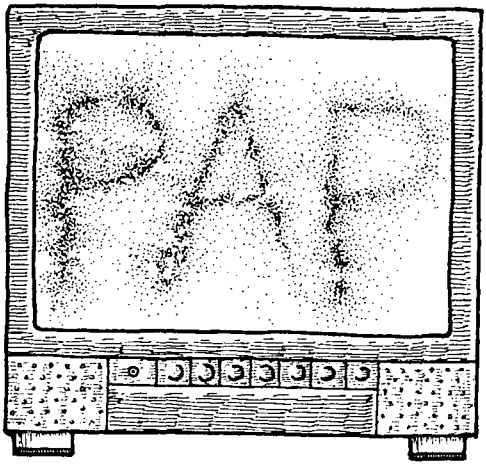

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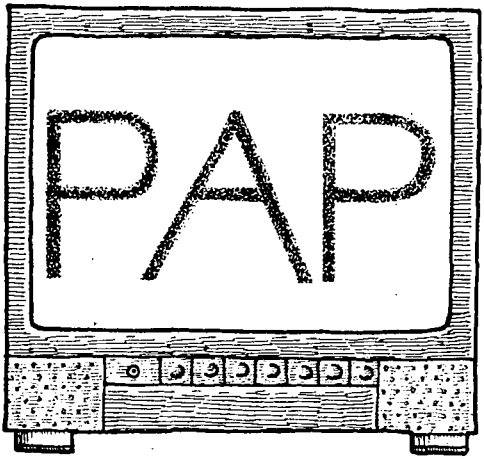

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